

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

A

KISS FOR THE
LEPER

(Le Baiser au Léproux)

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LONDON
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

Le Baiser au Lépreux *was first published in 1922*

*This book is made and printed in Great Britain
for Eyre & Spottiswoode (Publishers) Ltd., 15
Bedford Street, London, W.C.2, by the Stanhope
Press Ltd., Rochester.*

TO
LOUIS ARTUS
in admiration and friendship

A KISS FOR THE LEPER

I

JEAN PÉLOUEYRE lay stretched upon his bed. He opened his eyes. The scraping of cicadas sounded from all round the house. Sunlight oozed between the slats of the Venetian blind like molten metal. He got up. There was a sour taste in his mouth. He was so short that the low dressing mirror reflected his pinched little face, with its hollow cheeks and long, pointed nose. It was red in colour, and seemed to have been worn away like a stick of barley-sugar as the result of prolonged sucking. His cropped hair grew to a point low on his prematurely wrinkled forehead. When he grinned he showed his gums and a set of decayed teeth. He was filled with a more intense self-loathing than usual and addressed his image in words of pitying solicitude. "Go out, and take a walk, you poor devil," he said, and ran a hand over his ill-shaven chin. But how could he leave the house without waking his father? Monsieur Jérôme Péloueyre had laid it down that a solemn silence should be observed between the hours of one and four. Nothing must be allowed to disturb his siesta, which was his sole guarantee against the ravages of sleepless nights. The whole house was frozen into immobility. Not a door was allowed to be opened or shut, not a word or a sneeze must break the overwhelming silence. After ten years spent in begging and complaining he had finally trained Jean and the servants to observe his instructions, and even occasional passers-by had got into the habit of lowering their voices as they walked beneath his win-

dows. The very farm waggons took a roundabout way to avoid creaking past his door. But in spite of all these careful arrangements for the preserving of his slumbers, he was no sooner awake than he began to complain of plates rattling, dogs barking, humans coughing. Maybe he felt that utter silence might have produced the sleep from which there is no waking, a sleep which empties itself in death as a river is emptied into the ocean. The return to consciousness was always, with him, a painful process. Shivering, even in the dog days, he would sit down with a book close to the kitchen fire. The flames were reflected in the polish of his bald head. Cadette, busy with her cooking, paid no more attention to the master than to the fitches hanging from the beams. He, on the other hand, kept close watch on the old country-woman. He never ceased to find it a matter for wonder that, though she had been born in the reign of Louis-Philippe, and had lived through wars and revolutions, her experience had been limited to the fattening of a succession of pigs whose deaths, each Christmas, drew from her bleary eyes a few poor tears.

The blazing heat of summer always exerted an irresistible attraction on Jean Péloueyre, in spite of his father's siesta. It brought him the assurance of solitude. He could slip down the street, keeping to the thin line of shade cast by the houses, safe from the giggling mockery of young girls seated with their sewing in the open doorways. The sight of him miserably slinking past was sure to provoke an outburst of feminine laughter, but at two o'clock in the afternoon the women were still asleep, sweating with the heat and complaining of the flies. The well-oiled hinges made no noise as he opened

the door. He crossed the hall where the big store cupboards gave out a smell of damp and preserves, and the stench of boiling fat came from the kitchen. The flip-flop of his rope-soled shoes seemed but to intensify the silence. From its rack beneath a boar's head, he took down the small-bore rifle which was known to all the magpies for miles around. Jean Péloueyre was the sworn enemy of magpies. The umbrella-stand was filled with the walking-sticks of many generations – his great-uncle's gun-stick, his grandfather Lapeignine's fishing-rod and sword-stick, and sticks with iron ferules which recalled holidays spent at Bagnères-de-Bigorre. A stuffed heron stood on a dresser.

Jean went out. The heat parted and then closed behind him like the water of a pond. He was bound for the spot where the stream, just before it flows through the village, makes a packed treasure of its icy coolness, rich with the smell of running water, beneath a clump of alders. But he remembered suddenly that on the previous evening he had been plagued by the flies. He felt an urgent need to talk with some human creature. He therefore directed his steps towards the house of Dr. Pieuchon, whose son, Robert, a medical student, had come home for the vacation that very morning.

There was no life about the place, no sign of life, though the sun, streaming through the half-closed shutters glinted, now and again, on a pair of spectacles pushed back on an old woman's forehead.

He turned off between two blank garden walls. He was particularly fond of this narrow passageway, because there no prying eyes could lie in wait for him, and he might walk

at will along it, deep in thought. Thinking, with him, was accompanied always by much frowning, gesticulation, bursts of laughter, odds and ends of poetry spoken aloud – in short, a complete pantomime productive of constant mirth to the people of the town. But here the kindly trees drew close about his lonely colloquies. Yet, how much rather would he have had about him the tangle of a city's streets, where he could have talked *ad infinitum* to himself and no one would have turned a head to notice him! Or that, at least, was the picture he had painted for himself of what life in the great cities was like. It was based upon what Daniel Trasis told him in his letters. This friend, much against his family's wishes, had gone to Paris to "take up literature". Jean saw him in imagination poised for a leap into the hurly-burly of the Paris crowds, cleaving them like a diver. By this time, no doubt, he had learned to swim in that new element, was already panting his way towards a clearly envisaged goal – fortune, glory, love, all the rare and refreshing fruits which hung out of the reach of Jean Péloueyre.

On silent feet he entered the doctor's house. The servant told him that the gentlemen had lunched out. Jean decided to wait for young Pieuchon, whose room opened from the entrance hall. So eloquent was it of its owner that no one, seeing it, would have felt the need to know more of him. There was a pipe-rack on the wall, together with a number of posters announcing students' balls. A skull, with a cutty stuck mockingly between its teeth, stood on a table. There were several books bought for holiday reading: *Aphrodite*; *l'Orgie Latine*; *Le Jardin des Supplices*; *Le Journal d'une Femme*

de Chambre. A volume of *Selections from Nietzsche* caught Jean's attention, and he began to turn the pages. From an open trunk came the stale smell of a young man's summer clothes which have been stuffed away just as he took them off.

This is what Péloueyre read:

"What is the meaning of 'good'? – All that enlarges the sense of power in a man, the will to power, and power itself. What is the meaning of 'bad'? – Whatever is rooted in weakness. Let the weak and the failures perish: it is for us to see that they perish. What is more harmful than any vice? – Active pity for the feeble and the underdog: in fact, Christianity."

Jean Péloueyre put the book down. The words burst in upon him like the blaze of noon when the shutters of a room are thrown open. Instinctively he moved over to the window and let in the fury of the sun. He read the appalling passage through again. He closed his eyes, then opened them and stared at his reflexion in the glass. What a wretched little ferrety face he had, a country face. "Hobbledehoy" was what he had been called at school – and that was what he looked, with a miserable, undeveloped body, untouched by the normal miracle of puberty – a dainty offering, indeed, for the sacred founts of Sparta! He remembered how he had looked when he was only five, at the Convent School, and how, notwithstanding the superior social position of his family, all the prizes and good marks had gone to his pretty, curly-headed companions. He recalled the elocution test, in which, though he had read better than anybody else, he

had been placed bottom. He sometimes wondered whether his mother, who had died of consumption, whom he had never known, would have loved him. His father had always made much of him, as of an ailing replica of himself, a feeble shadow which he trailed at his heels, as he shuffled in carpet-slippers through the world, or watched from his bed in the alcove that smelled of valerian and ether. Monsieur Jérôme's elder sister, Jean's aunt, would doubtless have detested him — had it not been for the fact that the adoration with which she surrounded her son, Fernand Cazenave, with whom she lived in B——, a man of some importance and President of the Borough Council, so absorbed her energies that she barely noticed the existence of anybody else, could be said scarcely even to see them. There were times, all the same, when, with a smile or a word, she would draw Jean Péloueyre out from the state of nothingness which was his normal existence, simply because she shrewdly reckoned that this son of an invalid father, this poor wretch who was destined for a life of celibacy and an early death, would canalize the Péloueyre fortune for the ultimate benefit of Fernand Cazenave. . . . Jean took in at a glance the arid emptiness of his life. He had wasted his three years at College in a series of friendships all jealously guarded from the eyes of the curious. Neither his boon companion, Daniel Trasis, nor the priest who had taught rhetoric had ever really understood why he looked so like a lost dog.

He opened the Nietzsche volume at another page and gulped down the two hundred and sixtieth aphorism of *Beyond Good and Evil*, which treats of the two moralities — the Morality of the Masters and the Morality of the Slaves.

He looked at his face, which no amount of sunburn could make less yellow, repeated Nietzsche's words, and listened to them moaning about his brain like an October gale. For an instant he seemed to see his faith lying like a stricken oak at his feet. Was not what he saw, lying there on the ground in the sweltering heat, his faith? No, no – the tree still held him tight with all its myriad roots. The storm passed, and he found once more within his heart the beloved presence of a mystery under the thick foliage that now again hung motionless about him. But he had suddenly made the discovery that Religion, for him, meant refuge. For the ugly orphan it had opened a way into the night of consolation. Someone upon the altar took the place of the friends he had never had, and that devotion after the flesh which he would have given to a mother had become concentrated upon the Virgin. All the unspoken confidences which stifled him, were poured out in the Confessional, or in his silent evening prayers, when the shadow-laden vessel of the church gathered and held the last remaining dregs of the earth's coolness. Then it was that his heart broke like a shattered vase before the feet of the Invisible. Had he been curly-headed, like Daniel Trasis, had he been blessed, like him, with the kind of face that women never tire of stroking, surely he would not have stayed content with a crowd of old crones and domestic servants? He was of the race of slaves denounced by Nietzsche. He could discern in himself the distinguishing mark of servitude. In his face he bore the signs of an ineluctable damnation. His whole being was made to be trampled underfoot. To that extent he resembled his father – a man no less devout than himself, but with a greater knowledge

of theology, who had been used at one time to wade patiently through Augustine and Aquinas. Jean, to whom dogma meant little, whose religion was all emotional outpouring, never ceased to wonder at Monsieur Jérôme's more intellectual approach. All the same, he remembered the words which his father was never tired of repeating – 'Where should I be now if I had not had Faith?' Not that faith, in his case, was strong enough to send him to Mass when he had a cold. On the major Feast Days, Monsieur Jérôme was always accommodated in the overheated Sacristy, where he sat, swathed in mufflers, following the Office.

Jean Péloueyre went out. He walked, as before, between the two blank walls, watched by the silent, kindly trees, gesticulating. Now and again he deliberately pretended that the burden of his faith had fallen from him, that the buoy to which he had clung, which had kept him alive upon the waters of life, had vanished in a flash. It had gone, and nothing remained – nothing at all. He revelled in the sense of utter exposure, rolling it, like a flavour, round his tongue. Words forgotten since his schooldays came to his lips, pressing for utterance: "*... My wretchedness doth exceed my hope. . . . I praise thee, O Lord, that thou hast persevered with me. . . .*" A little further on he set himself to prove to an audience consisting of trees, piles of stones and blank walls that there have been Masters even among Christian men, that the Saints, the great Orders, the whole fabric of the Universal Church, have offered a sublime example of the Will to Power.

Wrought to a pitch of high excitement by his thoughts, he was recalled to the present only when he heard the sound of his steps upon the flags of the entrance hall – a sound

which, when he reached the first landing, produced from somewhere an ailing murmur. A whining, sleepy voice was calling for Cadette, and was followed at once by the flip-flop of the servant's slippers as she moved across the kitchen floor. The dog barked. Shutters were thrown back. Monsieur Jérôme was awake, and the house had cast off its spell of silence.

It was the hour of the day at which the old gentleman, with puffy eyes and a sour taste in his mouth, saw the world in its most sombre colours. Jean Péloueyre sought the refuge of the drawing-room (never used except when there was company), which was as cool as a cellar. A mouldering wall-paper showed the underlying plaster in patches. A clock divided up the passing stream of time, though there was no one to hear its ticking. He burrowed deeply into a thickly padded chair, bared within himself the spot where Faith lay agonizing, and drew in deep draughts of anguish. A fly buzzed and settled. A cock crew. . . . There was a quick trill of birdsong . . . then another cock . . . a lot of cocks. . . . He slept until that most delightful of all the hours of the day when it had been his custom to walk through the little winding lanes until he reached the church, where, entering by the smallest door, he would let himself drift aimlessly about the scented darkness. Was all that over? Would he never again keep that particular tryst? The only one that poor sluglike Jean Péloueyre had ever known. He did not keep it now, but went instead into the garden, where the setting sun made him say: "It's getting less hot." The air was a flutter of white butterflies. Cadette's grandson was watering the lettuces – a good-looking oaf with bare feet thrust

into wooden clogs, and a great favourite with the girls. Jean Péloueyre always avoided him, feeling ashamed to be the boy's master. Would it not have been more fitting that he, the weakling, should serve this young and glorious God of the garden? He dared not even smile at him from a distance. Whenever he had to deal with country-folk, his natural shyness almost paralysed him. Many a time he had tried to help the curé with his parish work, and in Sunday School, but had always slunk home in the darkness, oppressed by a feeling of self-contempt, knowing himself to be stupid and an object of universal mockery.

Meanwhile, Monsieur Jérôme was strolling along the garden path with its border of little bunchy pear-trees, with its heliotrope and mignonette and geraniums whose fragrance he could not catch, so overwhelming was the scent of the great lime. Monsieur Jérôme dragged his feet. The ends of his trouser-legs were tightly fastened between ankle and slipper. His battered old straw hat had a silk band. He wore round his shoulders an ancient knitted cape discarded by his sister. Jean recognised the book he was carrying—a volume of *Montaigne*. No doubt, the *Essays*, like his religion, served the old gentleman in the guise of an alibi, made it possible for him to dignify with the name of wisdom his failure ever to achieve anything. Yes, thought Jean Péloueyre, his poor parent always gave the name of stoicism or of Christian resignation, turn and turn about, to the utter uselessness of his existence. At that moment, Jean felt very clear-headed. Certainly, he loved his father, and as certainly he pitied him, but the feeling of which he was most conscious just now was neither love nor pity, but contempt!

The sick man was full of complaining – he had a pain in his neck, he couldn't breathe properly, he felt sick. One of the tenant farmers, Duberne d'Hourtinat, had come storming into the house saying that he'd got to have a room added to his cottage, so that he might house a great clothes-press belonging to his married daughter ! Was there no place where he could suffer undisturbed ? Nowhere he could be left to die in peace ? And, to top all, to-morrow was Thursday – which meant public market and private invasion. His sister, Félicité Cazenave, and his nephew, would reign supreme in the house. From dawn on there would be no sleep for the invalid, because the cattle in the market square would wake him. The din of the Cazenave's car at the front door would herald the arrival of the weekly scourge. Aunt Félicité would force her way into the kitchen and upset all his feeding arrangements in the interest of those of her son. At nightfall the couple would depart, leaving Cadette in tears and the master at his last gasp.

Cringing and weak in the face of the enemy, Monsieur Jérôme fed his rancour in secret. He had grumbled so often about getting his own back on the Cazenaves that Jean paid no particular attention this time when the old man said: "We can cook their goose, Jean, if only you'll lend a hand – but will you ?" Jean, whose thoughts were a million miles away from the Cazenaves, merely smiled. But his father was watching him. "You ought to cut a smarter figure at your age," he went on. "How badly turned out you are !" Though Monsieur Jérôme had never before shown the slightest interest in his son's appearance, Jean was not unduly perturbed. He had not the faintest premonition of what was

waiting for him at this critical turning-point of his life. He took the volume of *Montaigne* from his father's hand. "My own preference", he read, "is for a life that shall be unruffled, dull and silent. . . ." Well, *their* life was most certainly unruffled, dull and silent ! They watched a puff of wind ripple the surface of the water in the garden tank, where tadpoles were nibbling at a dead mole. Monsieur Jérôme, convinced that the dew was beginning to fall, hastened towards the house. Jean, with nothing in particular to do, wandered idly to the bottom of the garden, and stuck his head out of the little door opening on to a lane, which had been left ajar. At sight of him, Cadette's grandson, who had got a girl in his arms and was pressing her tightly to him, let her go suddenly, as though he were dropping a load of stolen fruit.

II

THAT night Jean Péloueyre slept scarcely at all. His windows stood wide open to a darkness that was mild as milk – and noisier than the day because of the croaking of frogs in the ponds. But noisiest of all were the cocks, who never ceased to crow the whole night through till dawn, when they fell silent, worn out from having heralded the dim, deceptive radiance of the stars. Those in the little town sent out their warning, and from all the outlying

farms, one after the other, came back the answer – “*A cry repeated by a thousand sentinels. . . .*”

Jean lay awake, lulling himself with this line, which he murmured to himself over and over again. The windows, like punching machines, cut from the surrounding blackness squares of deepest blue, ravened by stars. He got up and, moving on bare feet, gazed from them at the distant worlds, calling them by their names, and ceaselessly revolving the problem with which he had found himself confronted on the previous evening. . . .

. . . Had he committed himself to a metaphysical system or merely to a pattern of ingenious consolation? Doubtless, among the Masters of this world could be numbered many believers. But had Chateaubriand ever hesitated to risk his hope of salvation for a woman's arms? How often had not Barbey d'Aurévilly betrayed the Son of Man for a kiss? Was not their disloyalty to God the measure of their triumph?

He was wakened at dawn by the harrowing screams of young pigs. As on every Thursday, he refrained from opening the shutters for fear lest the crowds in the market square might see him. On the pavement, just under his window, Madame Bourideys, who kept the haberdashery shop, had just stopped Noémie d'Artailh to ask whether she had breakfasted. This Noémie was a girl of seventeen, and Jean stared at her with greedy eyes. The brown, curly hair, which made her look like a Spanish angel, went ill with her stocky body. But he adored the contrast of the ill-proportioned, sturdy form and the seraphic face which made all the ladies

of the neighbourhood say that Noémie d'Artiailh was as pretty as a picture. A Virgin by Raphael who had never grown to her full stature, she roused the best and the worst in Jean, stimulating him to noble thoughts and to grossly voluptuous dreams. Even at this early hour, her neck and her lovely throat were shining with moisture. Sketchy lashes served but to stress the purity of her long, dark-coloured lids. Her face still held the unformed look of childhood, and the young lips were virginal. But then, suddenly, one noticed the strong, boyish hands, the firm calves, compressed just above the heel, where the ankles should have been, by her tight shoe-laces. At this angel Jean Péloueyre now furtively gazed. Cadette's young grandson would have looked her boldly in the face. Handsome youths, even when they are of the working class, enjoy the privilege of outstaring girls. When, at High Mass, she walked up the nave and brushed against his chair, Jean Péloueyre scarcely dared to breathe the air set moving by the swish of her muslin dress, or sniff the smell of soap and clean linen that followed in its train. . . . He sighed, now, and put on yesterday's shirt, which he had worn also on the day before that. His body was not worth taking trouble over. He used a tiny jug of water and a minute basin, both so small that he could shut the lid of the washstand without fear of breaking them. . . .

Seated under the lime-tree, he did not set about saying his prayers, but read the paper instead, holding it in such a way that Cadette's grandson could not see his face. The wretched urchin was actually whistling! A red carnation was stuck behind his ear. He glittered and shone like a young cockerel. His dark blue trousers were held in at the waist by a belt.

Jean Péloueyre felt a mean hatred of him, though the knowledge that he did so gave him a horrid sense of guilt. He found no consolation in thinking that the youth would grow into an ill-favoured farm-hand. All that meant was that some other young creature, no less strong, no less well set up, would inherit the job of watering the lettuces, just as other white butterflies would later on flutter above the beds, no different from those he saw to-day. "My heart" – he said to himself – "my heart is even uglier than my face on this fine summer morning."

He could hear the curé's squeaky voice coming from the house. What sly purpose could have brought the man here at such an hour? He did not usually pay his daily visit so early. How, to-day of all days, could he risk meeting Fernand Cazenave, who always flew into a rage at the mere sight of a man of the cloth? Hidden behind his tree, he watched Fernand go trotting by – it was his regular habit to go for a short run before meals. His mother was panting in his wake. Her great lumbering body, with its protuberant bust that seemed to run straight up into her Junoesque head, was like some worn-out, broken-down machine moving in response to the orders of her beloved boy. It was as though, by pressing a button, he had set some complicated piece of mechanism in motion. The Borough Councillor was only too glad to stop and wait for her to come up with him. He took out a handkerchief, mopped his streaming forehead, and wiped the leather lining of his straw hat. He stood there like an affronted God, sweating under his alpaca coat. Two small, steely eyes looked out upon the world from behind a

pair of spectacles, but reflected nothing of what they saw. It was his mother's self-imposed task to clear a path for him through life, breaking human beings in the process as though they had been obstructing branches. There was a favourite story to the effect that she had once said: "If Fernand ever marries, my daughter-in-law will die." No daughter-in-law had, as yet, taken the risk, and indeed, what young woman would have been willing to groom and feed this man of settled habits who, at past fifty, was accustomed to being coddled like a baby?

The Angelus sounded through the morning heat. Jean Péloueyre heard the Borough Councillor mutter to himself: "Those filthy bells!"

By the time he had slipped into the dining-room and had sat down, his aunt and Fernand were already enthroned with napkins tucked under their chins. Monsieur Jérôme, too, was late. In outward appearance he was round-shouldered and timid, but he had a lively eye and made no bones about admitting that it was the curé who had kept him. The two Péloueyres sat huddled over their plates, waiting for the storm which did not burst until the leg of mutton made its appearance. Fernand Cazenave was served first. With his fork poised, he silently questioned his mother with his eyes. Félicité sniffed at a piece of the meat, put it back on her plate, and let fall the single word: "Overdone!" At one and the same moment the visitors pushed their helpings aside. Cadette appeared from the kitchen, looking like a frightened hen, and began to defend her handiwork in a spate of outraged patois – but the noise she made was unnecessary, be-

cause the Councillor had finally decided to appease his wolfish hunger with the overcooked roast. His pangs allayed he excused himself for not having said good morning to his uncle. The reason was that he had seen a priest's beaver in the hall, and a priest, as they very well knew, made him feel physically sick. Without raising his eyes, Monsieur Jérôme, speaking in his colourless monotone, said: "It was about you, Jean, that the curé came to see me. He wants to get you married: what d'you think of that?" Fernand giggled, and remarked that the man couldn't be serious. "Why not? Jean's nearly twenty-three." Then Fernand Cazenave let himself go. What had it got to do with this fellow in skirts? Why should he go poking his nose into family affairs? Oblivious of every rule of good manners, he so far forgot himself as to ask in a low voice whether Jean was even "capable of marriage". His mother called the boor to order with a look. It would, she said, be a very good thing if Jean got married. "This house needs someone to run it properly, though young women, of course, have odd notions, and Jérôme must expect to have his habits turned upside down." Fernand, having by this time quietened down, agreed. There was no reason at all why Jean shouldn't found a family. But wouldn't it mean great unhappiness for him? The dear boy was as settled in his ways, and had as many whims and fancies, as an old bachelor. Aunt Félicité hinted that it might be as well, should such a plan actually materialize, for her brother *not* to live with the young couple. Of course, it would be a terrible blow to him. She recalled his many abortive attempts to send Jean away to school. Often his ticket had been taken, his outfit bought, and the cab had been already

at the door, and, at the very last moment, his father had decided to keep him at home.

Though he felt thoroughly uneasy, Jean decided that all this talk of marriage *must* be a malicious invention of Monsieur Jérôme's. He sat there thinking his private thoughts. His aunt's words had set his memory working on those October evenings when the ancient brougham had stood waiting in the rain to take him across the *Bazardais* to the religious establishment where the children of the Landes sit poring over their dictionaries while their thoughts are busy with the shooting season. His trunk, which had once belonged to a great-uncle, still retained a few scraps of its flowered paper lining. Monsieur Jérôme had always, on those occasions, broken down and sobbed, pretending that he was in for one of his attacks – so cowardly had he been when the terrible moment of parting actually arrived. It was more than probable that the poor man's rule of silence dated from that time, but the silence had always been faintly troubled by the ailing presence of young Jean. And so it came about that the boy had worked, until he was fifteen, with the curé, and had never gone away to school at all, except when the time came for him to take his baccalauréat. . . . What was this sudden whim about getting him married? He remembered something very odd that his father had said to him, the evening before in the garden . . . but what was the use of worrying. He told himself that people like him didn't get married. . . . The Cazenaves must be mad to take so ludicrous an idea seriously. They were urging his father now to tell them the name of the "intended", but the arrival of siesta-time saved Monsieur Jérôme from the necessity of answering

their questions. In spite of the heat, mother and son went for a stroll in the garden, while Jean, in a perfect frenzy of uneasiness, watched them from the passage window, walking up and down, deep in talk.

The sound of the car starting up was a presage of departure. The old gentleman woke from his slumbers, and Jean, as soon as he heard the shuffling of paternal slippers, made his way to the room that reeked of medicines. Within the walls of this evil-smelling laboratory the truth was revealed to him. All this talk of marriage was no joke. It was seriously intended that he should take a wife, and that wife was to be Noémie d'Artiailh. The long, three-panelled mirror showed Jean his body at full length. It looked as shrivelled as heather after a heath fire. "But she'll never have me," he stammered – and trembled as he heard the unexpected reply: "She has already been sounded and shows no dislike of the idea. . . ." Her parents were in the seventh heaven, unable to believe in their good fortune. But Jean shook his head. With outstretched hands he seemed to be warding off a mirage. How could any young woman willingly come to his arms? Noémie, glimpsed at High Mass – Noémie, with eyes like two black flowers into which he had never dared to look? When her mysterious body walked past him up the nave he felt upon his own the little movement of the air set eddying in her wake. He thought of it as of the only caress that he had ever known. . . .

But all the while his father was droning on, explaining his intentions, which were fully shared by the curé. The essential thing was that there should be Péloueyres to come after

them, and so make it impossible for the property to pass either to Aunt Félicité or to Fernand Cazenave. Monsieur Jérôme added: "When the curé makes up his mind to get something he usually gets it, you know." Jean's smile was more like a grimace. The corners of his mouth trembled, and he said: "She'll regard me with horror." His father did not so much as dream of protesting. Never having been loved himself, it did not occur to him that his son might possibly know a happiness which he himself had missed. But he was perfectly prepared to run over the catalogue of Noémie's virtues. The curé had chosen her after careful consideration. She was a shining example to the whole parish. She was one of those who do not seek in marriage the joys of the body. Gifted with a strong sense of duty, submissive to God's ordinances and to her husband's will, she would develop into one of those mothers who are still to be found, women whose fundamental ignorance of life is proof against any number of pregnancies.

Monsieur Jérôme coughed and grew slightly sentimental. "Comforted by the knowledge that you are happily married and safe from the Cazenaves," he said, "I shall face death with a mind at rest. . . ." The curé was anxious that no time should be wasted, that Jean's fate should be decided at once and his boats burned. He had better speak to Noémie the very next day. She would be waiting for him after luncheon at the Presbytery, where Madame d'Artiailh would find some convenient excuse for leaving the young people together. Monsieur Jérôme's words poured out in a torrent. Anticipating the inevitable discussion, and aware that he would have to fight hard in order to overcome his son's unwilling-

ness, he felt nervously overwrought, and his hands were trembling.

So complete was Jean's bewilderment that he could find nothing to say. He was horribly ashamed at feeling so panic-struck. Here, surely, was an opportunity at last to escape from the herd of slave-men, and to act like a Master? This unique moment had been given him that he might break his chains and become a man. To his father's request that he should say something, he replied with a vague nod of assent. Later, when he came to look back on the instant of time in which his destiny had become fixed, he admitted to himself that ten ill-digested pages of Nietzsche had tipped the balance. He ran from the room, leaving Monsieur Jérôme amazed at the ease with which he had carried the day, and impatient to let the curé know all that had happened.

By the time he had reached the bottom of the staircase Jean was already growing accustomed to the miracle, and felt himself to be, in a vague sort of way, less chaste. Though he was still virgin, it had been revealed to him that virginity might not, perhaps, be a permanent state. He actually dared, in the secrecy of his mind, to conjure up a vision, and to gaze at it unflinchingly with brooding eyes. His head swam. It was enough to make him feel faint. He was seized by a desire to take a bath. It often happens in that part of France that baths are used for storage purposes, and the one belonging to the Péloueyres was filled with potatoes. These Cadette had to remove before it could be used.

After dinner, Jean Péloueyre took a walk through the little town. He was very careful not to gesticulate or talk to himself. Looking very stiff and official, he raised his hat to each

group of persons he passed seated in front of their house doors. At his approach they fell silent, like frogs in a pond, but nobody laughed. Soon he had left the last of the houses behind, and the open road was before him, still white and blinding, stretching between two ranged armies of black pines. The air was as hot as the inside of an oven, and the thousands of little receptacles standing by the trunks and filled with resin diffused a smell of incense about this great cathedral of the woods. At last he was free to laugh his fill. His shoulders shook, he cracked his finger-joints, he cried aloud: "I am one of the Master Race, the Master Race, the Master Race!" and repeated, again and again, certain lines of poetry, being careful to mark the caesura: "*Par quels secrets ressorts – par quel enchainement – le ciel a-t-il conduit – ce grand événement?*"

III

JEAN PÉLOUEYRE dreaded lest the conversation should peter out. The fear of silence was so strong in the curé and in Madame d'Artiailh that they felt impelled to touch on every conceivable topic, squandering their available material in a mad profusion. Very soon there would be nothing left to talk about. Noémie's dress overflowed her chair like a magnolia plant in a vase. In this shabby little parlour God was everywhere, on the walls, on the mantel-

piece, but it was the smell of her young body that filled it. The sappy, untamed fragrance of July was unescapable the fragrance of too strongly scented flowers which it is wise to remove from a room at nightfall. Jean turned his eyes, but not his head. Noémie had come down from her pedestal. It was as though, at this short range, he were seeing her through a magnifying-glass. Eagerly he scrutinized her, trying to see her faults, to descry the "flaws" in this quivering, living metal. There were blackheads on her nostrils. The skin at the base of her throat seemed to have been burned by too violent an application of iodine, which ought to have been washed off. At something the curé said she showed, in a sudden smile, a pure white palisade of teeth. They flashed for a moment only, but long enough to give Jean Péloueyre a glimpse of one of the incisors which looked faded and suspect. Embarrassed by his gaze, she kept her large, dark eyes lowered. It may well have been that he was looking hard at her so that she should not look hard at him!

The curé, Heaven be praised, was perfectly capable of carrying on the conversation unaided, and could continue indefinitely with his desultory prosing. It was easy to see, for all his plump body, that he was essentially an austere man. The dwellers in the outlying farms regarded him as something of a mystery, but in the town itself he was much beloved, and many a soul, under his direction, had reached a high degree of sanctity. It sometimes happens that the meek *do* inherit the earth, and his was a case in point. In manner he was quiet and retiring, but he had a will of iron – though he could bend it as circumstances might require. He always

kept the prettiest girls away from the weekly dances, and set his face, with professional austerity, against the amorous propensities of the local lads. That he had rescued the postmistress from the very brink of adultery was not generally known. And now, he had come to a definite decision in his own mind that for Jean Péloueyre to remain single would do him no sort of good. It was, too, a matter of some importance to this shepherd of souls that the House of Péloueyre should not, one day, become the House of the Cazenaves, that the wolf should not be made free of the fold.

Never, till now, had Jean noticed how deeply women breathe. Each time that Noémie inhaled, her breast very nearly touched her chin. . . .

. . . The curé decided to abandon all further pretence. He got up, saying that doubtless the dear children had a good many matters to discuss, and invited Madame d'Artialh to go with him into the garden and see how the greengages were coming along.

It was as though the dark room had now become merely the scene of an entomological experiment, with one little black, frightened male left confronting the female in her glory. Jean Péloueyre no longer moved at all, no longer even raised his eyes. It would have served no purpose to do so. He sat there, imprisoned in her gaze, while she took the measure of the larva that was to be her destiny. The beautiful youth with the face that never remains the same for two moments together, and who haunts the dreams of all young girls and keeps them tossing sleepless on their beds, obsessed by the image of his firm, hard body and the taut pressure of his arms – had melted away in the shadows of

the priest's parlour, had faded so completely that now there was nothing left of him but a frightened cricket cowering in the darkest corner available. She looked her destiny straight in the face, knowing that it could not be avoided. The idea of refusing the son of the Péloueyres was impossible. Noémie's parents might live in constant fear of the young man taking to his heels, but that their daughter should raise any objection would never have occurred to them.

For the last quarter of an hour all that life had to offer her had been sitting biting his nails and twisting and turning on his chair. He got up. He looked smaller standing than he had done seated. He stammered out something, but she seemed not to hear. He repeated the words: "I know I don't deserve . . ." At this she protested: Oh, Monsieur. . . . He abandoned himself to a mad access of humility, say that he fully realized no one could ever love him, and asked only that she might let him love her. He had found his tongue at last, and his sentences began to take shape. It had taken him twenty-three years to reach the point of pouring out his heart to a woman. In an effort to express the beauty of his feelings, he gesticulated as though he had been alone – and that was precisely what he was.

Noémie looked at the door. She felt no surprise. All her life she had heard people say that Jean Péloueyre was a "card", a "bit touched in the upper storey". On and on he talked, and the door stayed fast shut. This fantastic, gesticulating creature was the only living human being in the whole house. She began to feel uncomfortable. There was a lump in her throat. At last Jean stopped, and she felt the same kind of fear as when one knows that a bat has got in through the

window and is hiding. When the curé and Madame d'Artiailh returned she flung her arms round her mother's neck, not dreaming that her emotional outburst would be interpreted as an expression of assent. But already the curé had touched Jean's cheek with his own.

The two ladies left the house unaccompanied, so as to avoid rousing curiosity among the neighbours. Jean Péloueyre, peering through the shutters, saw Madame d'Artiailh's brittle, skinny figure moving away down the road, and Noémie trotting behind her like a dog. Was he aware of the slightly rumpled dress that would never again bloom in its pristine glory? did he realize that, in the bent neck, he was seeing the outward sign of a flower that had been cut and was already wilting?

The clumsy youth, accustomed to hiding from the world and determined to pass unnoticed, remained for several days bewildered and stupefied by all the hullabaloo that raged about him. Destiny, like a magic formula, had snatched him from obscurity. Nietzsche's words had tumbled the walls of his cell in ruins. With shoulders hunched, and blinking eyes, he went about like some night-bird blundering at noon. The people about him were changing, too. Monsieur Jérôme broke all the rules of his carefully ordered existence, and took to interrupting his siesta in order to accompany the curé on his way to the Sacristy. No longer did the Cazenaves put in an appearance each Thursday. The only sign of life they gave took the form of circulating atrocious stories about Jean Péloueyre's general state of health, with references to certain peculiarities which, so it was said, rendered him

highly unsuitable as a subject for matrimony.

Jean, meanwhile, looked out upon the world from the depths of his humility, marvelling to think that the d'Artiailh should actually be envied on his account. Everyone was saying that Noémie deserved her good fortune – no one more so. Her family was a very old one, but it had come on evil days. Monsieur d'Artiailh, having been fleeced in several business ventures, had quite unashamedly been reduced to filling a minor post at the Mairie. It was no secret that he and his wife had had to give their "general" notice at Easter. Jean Péloueyre, looking at himself in the glass, decided that he was not so ill-favoured after all. Wherever the curé went he made a point of saying that though the Péloueyre boy might not be much to look at, he had a very superior mind. The respectful silence in which Noémie sat each evening while, stretched on the drawing-room sofa, her affianced listened to himself keeping up his end in conversation, led him to conclude that what the curé said was true, and that what a serious-minded young woman really valued in her husband-to-be was intellectual distinction. He was as little constrained in her presence as he had been, formerly, on his lonely tramps. He grimaced, gesticulated, and quoted odds and ends of verse without prefacing them with any comment, while the lovely creature, snuggling in a corner of the same sofa, appeared to lend as willing an ear to his talk as once the trees had done that lined the empty roads.

He observed no reticence in his confidences, and went so far as to tell her all about Nietzsche, whose influence might well force him to alter his whole attitude to the problem of

moral obligation. She sat there, wiping her damp hands with a tiny handkerchief rolled into a tight ball, and staring at the door beyond which her parents were busy whispering, though she could not, thank Heaven, make out the sense of what they were saying. The general gossip on the subject of his future son-in-law was beginning to cause Noémie's father a deal of anxiety. At every important moment of his life he had been robbed and cheated, with the result that he could not help feeling that this apparent dawning of good fortune must conceal some threatening disaster. His wife, however, maintained that the only basis for these slanderous tales was deliberate mischief-making on the part of the Caze-naves, and the fact that, hitherto, women, as a result either of religious scruples or natural timidity, had played no part in Jean Péloueyre's life.

As soon as eleven o'clock sounded through the moonlit silence, she would open the door, omitting all preliminary of cough or knock. She had long given up all hope of finding the young people in anything that might even remotely be called a compromising situation. Still, she apologized for interrupting the "turtle-doves", but pointed out that it was well past "curfew" time. Then Jean would bestow a fluttering kiss on Noémie's hair and walk off down the street with only his shadow for company. His triumphal progress wakened the watch-dogs, and the brightness of the moon kept them from going to sleep again. Thus, even at night-time, his presence filled the village with noise. The curious thing was that he no longer felt the kind of emotional thrill that he had come to him when, in church, Noémie, in her freshly ironed dress, had driven ahead through the enclosing

air. He shook his head in an endeavour to put from him all thought of that September night when she would be his to do with as he willed. It might never come. A war might break out. Somebody might die. There might be an earthquake. . . .

Noémie d'Artiailh, in her long nightdress, was saying her prayers, watched only by the stars. She loved the feel of the cold tiles beneath her naked feet. Upon her tender breast she felt the cool compassion of the night. A tear slid down her cheek within reach of her tongue. She did not wipe it away, but licked it off. The quivering of the lime-tree and the scent of its blossoms seemed, somehow, to melt into the Milky Way. No longer did her dreams, of fancy bred, wander at will along the highways of Heaven. The crickets scraping away beside the hole in which they lived reminded her of her lord and master. One night, lying outside her sheets, a prey to the hot darkness, she broke into little whimpering sobs, and then groaned deeply, looking at her chaste, her untouched body that burned with all the vigour of young life, yet was fresh as any flower. What would her cricket do with it? She knew that his rights over her would be supreme, that he might caress her as he willed, might perform that fearful act of mystery, after which a child would be born to her, a tiny Péloueyre, black-haired and weakly. . . . Never, for the rest of her life, would she be free from her cricket. He would be with her always, even in her bed. Her mother, who had caught the sound of moaning, came in to her (all scalloped nightdress and scanty, plaited hair). On the spur of the moment the girl invented a story to the effect that the

idea of marriage was hateful to her, that she wanted to enter a Carmelite Convent.

Madame d'Artiailh, without attempting to argue, took her in her arms and held her close until the intervals between her sobs grew longer. Then she assured her that, in matters of this kind, one should always go for advice to one's spiritual director. But had not that advice been already as good as given? Was it not the curé himself who had chosen for her the way of marriage? Well-trained little daughter that she was, all gentleness and piety, Noémie could make no answer. She never read novels. She was, as it were, a servant in her parents' house, bred to obedience. They told her that good looks were not essential in a man, that marriage produces love as a peach-tree produces peaches. . . . But all this was unnecessary. In order to convince her it was enough to repeat the popular saying of that neighbourhood, that *the son of the Péloueyres is not the sort of man a girl refuses*. No, a son of the Péloueyres was not the sort of man a girl refused. One didn't refuse farms – tenant and freehold – flocks of sheep, silver plate, linen that was ten generations old and lay neatly piled in tall, deep, sweet-smelling presses – the chance, in short, of marrying into the best that local society could offer. One didn't refuse the Péloueyre boy.

IV

THERE was no earthquake, nor were there portents in the heavens. Dawn on that Tuesday in September broke gently over the earth. Jean Péloueyre had slept so soundly that it was necessary to wake him. The flags of the entrance hall and the stone threshold of the front door were almost invisible beneath the spread foliage of box and laurel and magnolia. The many odours of the house were drowned in the scent of that trodden scattering of flowers. The bridesmaids, incapable of sitting down in their long dresses, stood whispering together. The bar-parlour of the *Cheval-Rouge* was festooned with paper garlands. The breakfast would arrive, ready cooked, by the ten-o'clock train from B——. Along all the roads victorias were bringing in whole families of white-gloved guests. The sun shone on the badly brushed top-hats of the men whose "swallow-tails" kept the country-folk agape with admiration.

Monsieur Jérôme unmasked his batteries. He had decided to stay in bed. That was his way of ignoring all such things as funerals and marriages among his neighbours. In those solemn moments he always swallowed a tablet of chloral and drew his curtains. It was remembered how, when his wife lay dying, he had gone to bed on the top floor of the house, lying with his face turned to the wall, and had refused even to open an eyelid until he could feel sure that the last spadeful of earth had been shovelled on to the coffin, that the last guest had been safely packed into the train. On this morn-

ing of his son's marriage he forbade Cadette to throw back the shutters when Jean Péloueyre, looking like a green lad, and lost in the panoply of his wedding garments, came in to ask his blessing.

It was a terrible day! Shame and timidity flowed back with sudden force to overwhelm Jean Péloueyre. Though the procession moved through a din of bells, his sense of hearing, sharpened by long years of shooting trips, enabled him to catch the pitying comments of the crowd. He heard a man's voice murmur: "What a dam' shame!" Young girls, perched on their chairs, spluttered with laughter. Half-way between the blaze of the altar candles and the muttering congregation, he swayed, and caught at the velvet-covered prie-dieu for support. He could feel the mystery of a woman's body trembling at his side, though he did not turn to look at her. . . . The curé began to read. On and on he went. . . . If only he would go on for ever! But the sun, scattering confetti on the old worn stones, would sink at last – and then would start the reign of the revealing night.

The heat had turned the food. One of the crayfish smelled bad. The ice-pudding was running and had melted to a mess of yellow cream. The flies preferred to be crushed rather than abandon the dishes of pastry, and fat women were suffering tortures of constriction in their tight clothes. Patches of sweat remorselessly stained the fabric of their bodices. Only the children, seated at a table apart, yelled for joy. Peering from his abyss of misery, Jean Péloueyre watched the faces round him. What was Fernand Cazenave whispering to one of Noémie's uncles? Like a deaf-mute

Jean read the meaning of the phrase in the movement of his lips: "If only they had listened to us, this tragedy might have been avoided. But things being as they are, we couldn't very well interfere."

V

THE bedroom of the Family Hotel at Arcachon was furnished in imitation bamboo. There was no curtain to hide the domestic objects ranged beneath the washstand and the wallpaper was stained with the marks of crushed mosquitoes. A mingled smell of fish, seaweed and salt-water drifted in from the harbour. The purring of a motor-boat receded in the direction of the outer channel. Two guardian angels hid their shamed faces in the folds of the cretonne window-curtains. Long was the battle waged by Jean Péloueyre, at first with his own ice-bound senses, and then with the woman who was as one dead. As day was dawning a stifled groan marked the end of a struggle that had lasted six long hours. Soaked with sweat, Jean Péloueyre dared not make a movement. He lay there, looking more hideous than a worm beside the corpse it has at last abandoned.

She looked like a sleeping martyr. Her matted hair clung to her forehead as in the throes of death, accentuating the thinness of a face which might have been that of a beaten

child. Her hands, crossed on her innocent breast, clasped a faded scapular and a necklace of sacred medals. Someone should have kissed her feet, lifted her tender body, and run with it, still unawaked, to the open sea, there to leave it to the chaste mercies of the creamy foam.

VI

ALTHOUGH their circular ticket was valid for three weeks, they descended upon the Péloueyre home ten days after the wedding. The town was alive with chatter, and the Cazenaves, without waiting for their usual Thursday, hastened round to read the news in Noémie's face. But the young woman kept the secret of her heart well hidden. The d'Artiaills and the curé soon put a stop to all the talk. The young turtle-doves, they said, had merely preferred the peace of the family hearth to the noisy bustle of hotels and railway stations. Emerging from the church, after High Mass, Noémie in her finery smiled as she shook hands with all and sundry. If she could laugh it must mean that she was happy. Her regular attendance at daily Mass caused no astonishment. Several women made a mental note of the fact that, when she had taken Communion, she remained on her knees with her thin, sad face hidden in her hands. The conclusion drawn from her despondent looks was that she

was pregnant. Aunt Félicité turned up one day to gauge with furtive and appraising looks the size of her waist. But an intimate talk with Cadette – the ancient Sybil was found presiding over the weekly washing – reassured her. From then on she thought it politic to stay away, not wishing, she said, to seem, by her presence, to approve a monstrous union which had been the work of priests. She planned to reappear upon the scene at the very first rumblings of a drama the opening of which could merely be a matter of time.

Meanwhile, Monsieur Jérôme was amazed to find that his daughter-in-law looked after him with all the passion of a Sister of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. She brought him his various medicines at precisely the right times, arranged his meals in accordance with a strict dietary, and, with gentle authority, enjoined complete silence upon everybody when he was taking his siesta. As in the old days, so now, Jean Péloueyre made good his escape from the paternal home, and still crept along the least-frequented lanes, clinging to the walls of the houses. Hidden behind a pine-tree on the edge of a field of millet, he would watch for magpies. He would have liked to hold each passing minute captive, and so keep off for ever the coming on of night. But with every day that went by the light began to go earlier. The pines, surrendered to the fury of the equinoctial gales, gave out a muted echo of the roaring of the fierce Atlantic storm that reached them from the sands of Mimizan and Biscarosse. Above the dense bracken rose the little huts of turf which the people of the Landes use in October for shooting the wild pigeon. The smell of rye bread gave a sweetness to the air about the farmsteads. As the sun sank he would have a few last shots at the homing

larks. The nearer he came to the town the slower he walked. There was still a little time left, a short while, before Noémie would begin to suffer from the feeling of his presence in the house. He crossed the hall on tiptoe. She was always on the look-out for him, a lamp held high, and went to meet him with a smile of welcome. She offered her forehead to his kiss, felt the weight of his game-bag, and went through all the movements of a wife who is made happy by the return of her best-beloved. But it was only for a few minutes that she played her part. Not for a moment did she deceive herself with the thought that she had taken him in. During the evening meal Monsieur Jérôme saved them from the embarrassment of silence. Now that a young nurse had charge of him, he was for ever describing his symptoms. She had taken upon herself the duty of interviewing the tenants, and had much estate business to discuss with him. He was filled with an admiring wonder that this young girl should be the only person in the house capable of checking the agent's accounts and keeping an eye upon the sale of pit-props. He attributed to her, also, the fact that he had put on well over four pounds since his son's marriage.

When the meal was over, and Monsieur Jérôme sat dozing with his feet on the fire-dogs, husband and wife would find themselves at last irremediably alone. Jean Péloueyre settled down as far as possible from the lamp, scarcely breathed, and did his best to fade into the surrounding darkness. But nothing could alter the fact that he was there, and at ten o'clock Cadette brought in the candles. The journey up the stairs was terrible ! The autumn rain whispered on the roof,

a shutter banged, a farm waggon rumbled into the distance. Noémie, kneeling beside the dreaded bed, repeated in a low voice the words of her evening prayer: "O God, here on my knees, I thank thee that thou hast given me a heart capable of knowing and of loving thee. . . ." In the darkness Jean Péloueyre could feel the adored body shrink away from him. He put as much space between them as he possibly could. Now and again Noémie, stretching a hand to touch the face which now, because she could not see it, seemed less odious, would find it warm and moist with tears. At such times, filled with remorse and pity, she would strain the unhappy creature to her, as, in the Roman amphitheatre, a Christian virgin might, with closed eyes and teeth fast clenched, have leapt forward to throw herself before the waiting beast.

VII

PIGEON shooting served Jean Péloueyre as a pretext for spending whole days away from her whom, by the mere fact of his presence, he hourly murdered. So quietly did he get up that Noémie never waked. By the time she opened her eyes he was already far away, jolting over the muddy roads in a country cart. He took out the horses at one of the farms, hid himself close to a turf hut, and whistled, always on tenterhooks lest a covey might already have been

sighted. Cadette's grandson shouted, in response to his signal, that he could come on, and then the waiting began – long hours of mist and day-dreaming lulled by the sound of sheep-bells, the cries of shepherds and the cawing of rooks. By four o'clock sport was over for the day, but, in order to avoid reaching home until the last possible moment, Jean would slip into the church. He said no prayer, but just stood there, a bleeding victim, in Someone's presence. Often the tears would start to his eyes: often he felt as though his head were resting on invisible knees. . . .

When he got back he pitched on to the kitchen table his "bag" of slate-coloured birds, the half-swallowed acorns showing as lumps in their crops. Then he would stretch his feet to the blaze until his boots began to smoke. He could feel the bitch's tongue warm on his hand. Cadette would be busy soaking bread in the soup and he would follow her into the dining-room. Noémie would say: "I didn't know you had got back" – and then, "Do go and wash your hands." That would send him upstairs to the bedroom, where the shutters had not yet been closed. . . . A lamp shone on the rain-filled ruts of the road. . . . He washed his hands, but did not bother about cleaning his nails. He was careful to keep them hidden under the edge of the table so that Noémie should not notice. He gave her a sidelong look. How white her ears were! She had no appetite. Clumsily he pressed her to take a second helping of mutton. "But I'm not hungry, I tell you!" A faint, submissive little smile, and sometimes the vague pursing of her lips into the semblance of a kiss, would take the edge off these short, sharp bursts of impatience. She looked at her husband with the direct gaze of a woman who,

at her last gasp, and comforted by faith in Heaven, looks straight at death. She continued to smile as one wishing to comfort a sick man who is near to dying. . . . It was he, Jean Péloueyre, who had brought those heavy shadows to her eyes, who had drained the colour from her ears, her lips, her cheeks. The simple fact of his being there was enough to suck the life from this young body. The very ruin that he caused made her all the dearer to him. Was ever a victim more truly loved by her executioner?

Monsieur Jérôme was the only one among them all who flourished. The gentle old man was unaware of any suffering but his own. To the amazement of those about him, he announced with delight that he felt considerably better. His asthma was less persistent than it had been, and he was managing to doze into the early hours without the help of any drug. Having to deny himself to Dr. Pieuchon – whose son had had a haemorrhage and was being treated at home – had brought him luck – or so he said. Fear of infection had led him to break off all communication with his old friend. He swore that his daughter-in-law could do all that was necessary, and that she was more experienced than any doctor. Nothing disgusted her, not even having to help him when he visited the lavatory. She had a knack of making the dreariest diet palatable. Condiments were forbidden so she substituted lemon and orange juice, and occasionally a drop of old Armagnac. In this way she roused his appetite, which had been dormant for fifteen years. She had taken to reading aloud in order to assist his digestive processes, and, though she was nervous at first, soon did it well.

She was quite tireless, and never stopped, pretending not to notice the old man's regular breathing, which always meant that he was dropping off. The clock struck. One more hour subtracted from the shuddering horror of the dark nuptial chamber: one hour less of having to watch the movements of that horrible body stretched beside her and pretending, out of pity for her, to be asleep. Sometimes the feel of his leg would wake her, and then she would slip into the space between the bedstead and the wall: or a light touch would set her trembling. He, thinking her asleep, would venture on a furtive kiss. When that happened it was her turn to simulate unconsciousness. For she always feared that, finding her awake, he might be tempted to go further.

VIII

THEY never had any of those quarrels that usually flare up between lovers. They knew themselves to be so deeply wounded that they dared not strike at one another. The tiniest cause of offence would have carried mortal poison, would have been beyond all hope of cure. Each was scrupulous never to touch the other's sore spot. Their every gesture was carefully calculated to spare unnecessary pain. While Noémie undressed he looked the other way, and never went into the bath-room while she

was washing. He acquired new habits of cleanliness, ordered a quantity of *Eau de Lubin*, with which he drenched himself, and shivered in a cold bath every morning. He held himself to be solely to blame for what had happened, while she was filled with self-loathing because she was not a wife pleasing to Gbd. No reproach, even unspoken, ever passed between them. The eyes of each implored the other's pardon. They decided to say their prayers side by side. Enemies in the flesh, they found union in their nightly supplications. Their voices at least could mingle. Kneeling there together, each in a world apart, they met in the infinite.

One morning they met, entirely by accident, at the bedside of a sick old man. They jumped at this new pretext of proximity, and, therefore, once each month, paid regular visits to all the sick of the neighbourhood, each giving to the other credit for this act of charity. On all other occasions Noémie carefully avoided Jean, or, rather, her body avoided his, while he was for ever in flight from her disgust of him. She tried, but in vain, to react against her sense of physical repulsion. One gloomy November day, though she hated walking, she forced herself to follow him out upon the heath as far as the deserted marshes, where the silence is so intense that just before a storm blows up one can hear the muted thud of the Atlantic surges on the sand of the seashore. The blue-eyed gentians were no longer in flower. She strode ahead like someone seeking to escape a danger, and he followed some way behind. The shepherds of Béarn, from whom Jean Péloueyre was descended, and who enjoyed rights of pasturage on these bare lands, had, many centuries before, dug there a drinking pool for their herds, and on its

muddy brink husband and wife stood for a while together. Jean's thoughts were busy with those long-dead peasants who had fallen victim to that mysterious ailment of the Landes, the "Pellagra", and had invariably been found at the bottom of pools like this one, or with their heads buried in the slime at the edge of a standing water. He, too, longed to clasp between his arms the niggard earth that had moulded him in its own likeness, and to end his life stifled by its kiss.

IX

NOÉMIE'S reading was often interrupted by a visit from the curé. He called her "my child", and accepted her offer of a glass of home-made cordial. But he seemed no longer able, as in the old days, to embark on theological arguments with Monsieur Jérôme, or to amuse him with stories of the local clergy. He was a judge in whose presence they all put on their masks. Their eyes were expressionless. They felt that he could read their hearts. The conversation was desultory, and he no longer felt at ease. His every word seemed to point to something which, as yet, could not be clearly seen. He stretched his short, swollen legs to the blaze, and would suddenly, now and again, shoot quick glances at the silent couple, and then turn his eyes away. Less peremptory, less sure of himself, than he had been

once, he had for some time given up retailing – as he had loved to do – those passages of words in which he had become involved with some local rationalist, passages always thickly studded with the recurring phrase – “And then I floored him by saying. . . .” Monsieur Jérôme remarked that he had never seen the curé so worried since the day when a former Mayor had announced his intention of having the church bells rung for civil burials, and to use the hearse which, by rights, belonged to the ecclesiastical authorities. The curé was anxious that Jean Péloueyre should resume work on a piece of historical research relating to the parish, upon which he had once eagerly embarked, only later to abandon it. The young man gave as his excuse the absence of several essential documents. The truth of the matter was that his enthusiasms were shortlived, and that he never completed anything that he undertook. The first few pages of the books he read were always scribbled over with notes, but the last were left uncut. He could not think properly unless he was walking, with the result that he never settled down for long at his writing-table. One evening, when Monsieur Jérôme had gone to bed, the curé insisted on reopening the subject. Jean Péloueyre maintained that it would be quite impossible for him to carry his work further unless he could consult certain specialized books at the Bibliothèque Nationale. A journey to Paris, however, was not to be thought of. . . . “And why not, dear boy?” The curé asked his question in a low voice, playing all the while with the fringe of his sash, and keeping his eyes obstinately fixed upon the fire. A very small murmur made itself heard: “I shouldn’t like Jean to leave me.” But the curé pressed his point, arguing

that it was a sin not to make the most of such talents as we have. Incapable of teaching in Sunday School or of administering works of charity, Jean ought not, any longer, to play the part of an idle workman. The good man warmed to his theme. The sad little voice spoke again, though obviously with an effort: "If Jean goes, I shall go with him." The curé shook his head: Noémie had become indispensable to the dear invalid upstairs; besides, the separation would not be for long – a few weeks, a few months, at most. . . . She could not maintain her opposition. Nothing more was said, and the curé put on his thick coat and his clogs, preparatory to leaving. Jean Péloueyre threw a cape round his shoulders, lit the lantern, and led the way.

The short and rainy December days made it impossible for husband and wife to avoid one another – except when Jean Péloueyre went out after woodcock, and even then, he had to come back at four o'clock, when it began to get dark. A single fire and a single lamp sufficed to bring their estranged bodies into a close intimacy. The whisper of the falling rain around the house made them feel sleepy. As always in winter, Monsieur Jérôme had rheumatic pains in his left shoulder, and complained a good deal. But Noémie's health was improving. Every day now she forced herself to dissuade Jean from going away. She had taken a sacred vow to do everything possible to keep him with her. Her pleading made it impossible for the wretched man to remain in a state of indecision. By seeming to hold him back she compelled him to make up his mind. He looked at her with the eyes of a beaten dog. "I must go, Noémie." She protested, but the moment he showed any sign of faltering, instead of pressing

her advantage, said no more. Monsieur Jérôme, though he was fond of quoting from *Les Deux Pigeons*: "*l'Absence est le plus grand des maux*", was secretly delighted at the prospect of being left alone with his daughter-in-law, and all the time the curé went on nagging at Jean whenever they met. What could the poor youth do against a plot so well and cunningly laid? Quite apart from the fact that, in his heart of hearts, he knew that the verdict of banishment was right and proper? Save for a single pilgrimage to Lourdes, and his honeymoon at Arcachon, he had never left his rut. But to plunge alone into the hurly-burly of Paris was tantamount to drowning in an ocean of humanity far more terrible than the Atlantic. But too many people were intent on pushing him over the edge, and it was finally decided that he should leave during the second week in February. Long before the appointed day Noémie began fussing about his luggage and the clothes he should take with him. Even before he left she had begun to recover her appetite. There was more colour in her cheeks. One afternoon she had a snowball fight with Cadette's grandson. Jean Péloueyre watched them from a window on the first floor. He had no illusions. He fully realised the significance of this recovery in her spirits. As the fields free themselves from the grip of winter, so was this woman freeing herself from him. He was leaving her that she might once more put forth her flowers.

Jean Péloueyre lowered the dirty window of his carriage, and watched Noémie's waving handkerchief until the last possible moment. How gaily it fluttered! — a signal of leaving and happiness! For the whole of the last week she had

intoxicated the man who was now going from her by an assumption of tenderness, and the apparent warmth of her response had been so marked that, one night, deceived into the belief that she was coming to life beneath the stirring of his breath, he had been tempted into saying: "What if I shouldn't go, after all, Noémie?" Though all this had passed in the concealing darkness, and though her only reply had been a stifled exclamation, he had guessed the panic terror in her heart, and had been unable to keep himself from adding: "Don't worry; I'm going all right." It was the one sign he gave that he had not been taken in. She turned her face to the wall, and he could hear her crying.

The little train was running through the pine-woods, and Jean Péloueyre sat watching the familiar trees slip by. He recognized the thicket where once he had missed a woodcock. The line ran parallel with the road along which he had so often driven in a farm cart. He could refer by name to this or that passing farm, swathed in smoke and mist, standing on the edge of a fallow field, with its bakchouse, stables and well, tight held in its embrace. He knew the tenant. . . . He changed trains and was whirled across the great expanse of heath over which he had never shot. At Langon he said good-bye to the last outposts of the pines, parting from them as from friends who had accompanied him on his way as far as they could, and, now that they had come to a halt, stretched out their branches in a final blessing.

X

HE took a room in the first hotel that he encountered on the Quai Voltaire. He spent the morning watching the rain fall upon the river which he had not yet plucked up sufficient courage to cross, and then, at noon, slipped along to the station restaurant at the Gare d'Orléans, where he sat dozing amid the din of trains which were leaving with a load of happy travellers for the south-west. When he had finished his meal he felt that he could not stay on without ordering something more, and drank two glasses of liqueur as a postscript to his bottle of white wine. His spirits soared nimbly into the absolute. The nervous twitching of his face, his broken snatches of speech, brought an occasional smile to the lips of the waiters and of people sitting at the nearby tables, but for most of the time, wedged between the revolving door and one of the pillars, he remained unnoticed. He read the newspapers right through, advertisements and all. Murders, suicides, dramas of jealousy and madness – all were grist to his mill. He stuffed himself full with the world's tragedies.

After dinner he took a platform ticket and hunted for the coach bearing the label "Irun". In twelve hours' time its large windows would be reflecting the monotonous countryside of the Landes. He reckoned that the train would pass less than fifteen miles, as the crow flies, from his home. He put his hand on the side of the carriage. When it jerked into movement it was as though he were watching one half of

himself disappearing for ever. He went back to the restaurant. An orchestra was playing and the powerful spell of the music filled him with a sensation of despair. It brought vividly before him the ghost of Noémie, nor could he shake himself free from the obsession of her presence. He let his imagination play over the details of a body at which he had never dared to look save when its owner was asleep. Through the long nights of September, with the moon spilling its light over the bed, the sad young faun had learned to know it better than he could ever have done as a lover happy in the mutual ecstasy of possession. What he had held in his arms had never been more than a corpse, but, with his eyes at least, he had penetrated to its mysteries. Never, perhaps, do we know anybody more completely than the woman who does not love us. At this very moment Noémie would be lying fast asleep in the huge, cold room, happily asleep, freed from a repulsive presence, revelling in the pleasure of an unshared bed. Across the sundering miles he was aware of his loved one's happiness, a happiness that owed its being to his absence from her side.

Holding his head in his hands, he worked himself up into a mood of anger. He would go back to the country, would force himself upon her, would take his joy of her, even if it meant her death ! He would make her into the chattel of his pleasure. . . . Then her image came to visible life in his mind, silent, submissive, with the sweet, drooping breast that was like a tree with an offering of fruit. He remembered those moments of acquiescence when, without a cry, and almost dying with the horror of the experience, she had lent herself to his desires. . . .

. . . He settled his bill, walked along the quay to his hotel, and undressed fumblingly in the dark, so that he should not see himself in the glass.

On every third day they brought him with his morning chocolate an envelope which he sometimes left unopened till the evening. He cared nothing for those insincere expressions of impatience for his return ! The only comfort he could find was in the thought that Noémie's hand had rested on the paper – that the nail of her little finger had made the tiny scratch beneath each word. Towards the end of March he thought that he detected a note of sincerity in what she wrote: "I know you don't believe me when I say that I long to see you again, but that's because you don't really know your wife. . . ." In another letter she said: "I miss you." He crumpled it up, and turned to another, this time from his father, which had reached him by the same post. "You will find Noémie much changed for the better. She looks plumper, and is really now a fine figure of a woman. She attends to me so well, and coddles me so sweetly, that I quite forget to thank her. The Cazenaves never put in an appearance nowadays. I know they think that you two have quarrelled. Well, let them think. I am bearing up wonderfully well, but I can't say the same for young Pieuchon, who never goes out at all now, except driving in a carriage. His condition is generally thought to be hopeless, though one of the doctors from B—— says he can cure him with a tincture of iodine and water. The young 'uns fade away a good deal quicker than us oldsters. . . ."

With the coming of the first fine weather Jean Péloueyre took his courage in both hands and crossed the river. He stood looking down on the Seine in the golden dusk, and his hands on the warm parapet caressed the stone as though it had been a living body. He heard a voice behind him murmuring words. It called him "dearie": it said, "Won't you come home with me?" He saw a young face close to his own, bloodless beneath its paint. A puffy hand, devoid of nails, sought his. He took to his heels and did not stop in his headlong flight until he reached the entrance to the Louvre. There he halted, panting slightly. Would he ever dare to listen to the invitation even of such a creature as that? Some woman who was *not* Noémie? . . . For the first time he wanted to find pleasure in the thought of an accomplice, of someone who, though she might find no pleasure in their traffic, would at least regard him with indifference, and not with disgust. But even that amount of poor and sordid pleasure was inconceivable. The bitter knowledge of this ultimate misery swept over him, and his anger flared anew. Why not seek forgetfulness tonight in acquiescent and submissive arms? Surely it was for men of his sort that these sellers of endearments existed?

He watched the evening sky reflected in the troubled water of the Tuileries Gardens. Children crowded about him, made curious by his gestures. He slouched away with drooping shoulders, made the round of the Place de la Concorde, reached the rue Royale, and, because it was time for dinner, felt brave enough to cross the threshold of a famous restaurant. Sitting close by the door, facing the bar where parrots with aigrettes in their hair sat perched as though at

a mahogany feeding-trough, he revelled in the knowledge that his appearance caused no surprise to the women customers, nor to the black and greasy waiters – the sewer-rats of expensive restaurants. This glittering tunnel attracted too many savages from the Americas, too many farmers and lawyers from the provinces, to see anything particularly funny about Jean Péloueyre. The Vouvray brought colour to his cheeks, and he smiled at the herd of animals attracted by the mahogany trough. A fat blonde slipped off her stool, asked him for a light, took a sip from his glass, promised him in a low voice exquisite happiness for five louis, and then hopped back again, hopefully, on to her perch. Though an old gentleman at the next table advised him to wait till closing-time, because “the left-overs reduce their prices”, he paid his bill and went out. He was joined on the pavement by the lady. She hailed a taxi and they were driven to some place behind the Madeleine. There was no vestibule to the hotel. The staircase led straight down to the street like a drainpipe designed to suck up all the filth of the pavements.

The sound of hairpins on marble woke Jean from his lethargy. He saw a pair of arms that looked enormous where they joined the shoulders. Bows of pink ribbon adorned an expanse of quivering flesh. She called him “petit loup”, while, with infinite care, she removed her stockings of artificial silk. This eagerness to give herself, this acquiescence, this submissiveness to his will, modified by no trace of disgust, horrified Jean Péloueyre far more violently than Noémie’s shrinking fear had ever done. The woman saw him fling a note on to the table, and was struck speechless with amazement. But before she could so much as make a move-

ment, he was out of the house, slinking along the street like a thief.

In the noisy crowds of the boulevard he knew the beatific sense of relief that comes when some great danger has been avoided. The bare branches of the chestnuts drew him to the Champs-Élysées. He found an empty bench and sat down, out of breath and coughing a little. The light of a lopsided moon was quite eclipsed by the glare of the arc-lamps. It must, he thought, be spreading its calm radiance over the vast stretches of dark tree-tops that lie between the Ocean and the Pyrenees. He no longer felt miserable. A sense of purity invaded him. The thought of his wretched chastity delighted him. A time was coming when Noémie and Jean would love one another through an endless summer's day. He tasted in anticipation the perfect mingling of their two bodies at last made glorious. In a great splendour of light their immortal, their incorruptible flesh would cry aloud in invitation and response. Aloud he said: "There are no Masters. We are all of us born slaves and we grow into the freedom of the Lord." A policeman approached, gave him one look, then, hunching his shoulders, walked away.

Every afternoon Jean sat outside the Café de la Paix on the brink of a sombre flood of human faces. Secret diseases, drink and drugs had stamped with an indistinguishable and appalling identity thousands of countenances that were, all of them, those of children. He was fascinated by the manoeuvres of the prowling prostitutes, and set himself to classify the herd of famished she-wolves. He played a game with himself which consisted in trying to guess what particular vice

was the animating principle of this or that gentleman with the monocle and the slobbering lip. Hungrily he sought one single face that might bear the distinguishing mark of a ruler, of a master of men. Could he have found but one member of that chosen race, he would have followed him, but he saw only vacant looks and trembling hands. Unnatural lusts had set their foul stamp on faces unaware of prying eyes. But even if he had come on some such Master as he sought, would there have been any assurance that he would have been immortal? Jean Péloueyre, sitting at his table on the boulevard, and gesticulating as he might have done between the walls of some village street in his native countryside, quoted to himself Pascal's comment on the ultimate end of even the most brilliant of worldly careers: when the game is done, one is always the loser. Bear witness to that, O Nietzsche of the softened brain – one is always the loser! . . .

Some young people close to him nudged one another. A woman seated with them put a question to Jean. He started, threw some coins on to the table, and took to his heels. Behind him he could hear the woman's voice: "Mad as a hatter!" He slipped away through the crowd, scampering like a rat past the shop fronts, elaborating in his mind the plan of an authoritative essay which should be called: *The Will to Power and the Will to Holiness*. Here and there he saw his face reflected in the glass of a show-case, but did not recognize it as his own. Bad food had left him more emaciated than ever, so that he was little more than skin and bone. The Paris dust irritated his throat. He should, by rights, have given up cigarettes altogether, but, in fact, he was smoking more than ever. He kept on spitting and coughing. Recur-

rent fits of giddiness forced him to cling for support to the street lamp-posts. He preferred to eat nothing at all rather than endure the agonies of indigestion. Would he be picked up one of these days in the gutter, like a dead cat? Well, if that happened, at least Noémie would be free of him. . . .

Thus did he brood, until at last he ran aground in a cinema, attracted thither less by the promise of the screen than by the prospect of continuous music. . . . Quite often, feverishly wandering, and dropping with fatigue, he would take refuge in a public bath-house, where the light was dimmed by gauze screens, and, to an accompaniment of dripping taps, he could enjoy the illusion of being freed from the burden of his body. He sought these wretched hideouts only because for a long time he knew no church in Paris but the Madeleine – the only one he passed on his walk from his hotel to the Café de la Paix. But it so happened that on one occasion, having changed his route, he came across Saint Roch, and thereafter its shadowy interior became his daily haven. Its smell conjured up the church of his childhood, and he found in it the certainty of a Presence – the same here, at one of the traffic intersections of a vast city, as in a remote country town.

Not once did he cross the threshold of a library.

He might have lived on like this until the day of his death, had not a letter reached him one morning from the curé, calling him back to the fold. There was a note of urgency about it, notwithstanding the fact that it brought good news of Noémie and of Monsieur Jérôme. In a mood of profound mental distress Jean Péloueyre got into the coach labelled

"Irun", which, so often, he had felt sliding away, gently at first, beneath his hand, then gathering speed, towards the south-west.

XI

THE curé had had no special reason to send off his letter of recall. He had made up his mind, actually, after hearing one of Noémie's weekly confessions, which had contained nothing but a list of the most ordinary and venial shortcomings. But she had begged her director to give her spiritual assistance and so strengthen her in her fight against certain temptations into the precise nature of which she did not enter.

She had owed no small part of the pleasant languor which accompanied her early days of convalescence to Jean Péloueyre's departure. The mere being left to herself was a continuing delight. She drifted through the days completely happy in her own company. Incapable though she was of self-analysis, she felt, somehow, that she was different. Once more she was living the life of a young girl, but her body told her that she was a young girl no longer. Disgust had made her avert her eyes from the spectacle of her own budding womanhood, but the stranger who lived deep down in her seemed bent on seeking some mysterious satisfaction. Uneasy at finding that she could not now enjoy the

peace of mind which she had known before a man had come to possess her, she found it impossible not to notice the state of discord which reigned between her unawakened heart and her partially awakened body. The rending laceration of her whole being had brought nothing but horror, but the body sees to it that nothing of what it has endured shall ever be wholly forgotten. Because she never read anything but her prayer-book, and because, as a well-brought-up young person, she had never had a really intimate friend, neither confidences nor novels had so far enlightened her on the nature of her smouldering desires.

And then, at last, Destiny gave them a local habitation and a name.

The March sun was bringing a flash and glitter to the puddles in the market square. So heavy upon the house was the spell of Jérôme Pélouëyre's siesta that not so much as a creak was emitted by the furniture. Like all the other women in the town, Noémie was busy with her sewing. She sat in the embrasure of one of the ground-floor windows. The shutters were half closed. The table billowed with linen waiting to be darned. She heard the sound of wheels and saw an English trap draw up a few feet away. A young man was in the driving-seat. He seemed to be looking for somebody of whom he might ask his way. But the square was empty of life. Filled with curiosity, she pushed the shutters back. At that very moment the stranger turned his head, raised his hat, and asked where Dr. Pieuchon lived. She gave him the necessary information. He thanked her for her help, flicked his horse with his whip, and drove off. Noémie

settled down again to her sewing. All day long she plied her needle, while her thoughts played truant. She had given no conscious heed to the stranger's face, but its features were stamped upon her mind.

Next day he drove by again. This time he did not stop, but as he reached the Péloueyres' house reined in his horse, and scanned the shuttered windows for a sight of the young woman. At least, that was what he seemed to be doing, for he bowed. At dinner that evening, Monsieur Jérôme said he had had it from the curé that young Pieuchon was going from bad to worse, and that his father had called in a young doctor from the county town who was very highly thought of. He treated tuberculosis with strong doses of tincture of iodine, of which medicine the patient had to take several hundred drops diluted with water. Monsieur Jérôme expressed doubts whether the Pieuchon boy's stomach could tolerate such a mixture.

Each day the trap drove past, and each day it slowed down opposite the Péloueyres' house, though Noémie never once opened the shutters. The young doctor regularly bowed in the direction of the narrow strip of shadow where youth invisible was drawing in the breath of life. The townspeople showed much interest in this iodine treatment. All the consumptives of the district began to try it. It was confidently asserted that Pieuchon's son was better.

The spring that year was early. A spell of warm weather at the end of March freed the earth from its winter numbness. One evening, Noémie was able to leave the window open while she undressed. She leaned upon the sill, a prey to mingled sadness and joy. She felt wakeful. She stayed there,

face to face with the darkness which, by some secret process of its own, "revealed" to her the face whose print she bore within her consciousness. For the first time she let her mind dwell upon the stranger and deliberately gave free rein to her thoughts. Since he bowed so regularly every day without so much as setting eyes upon her, would it not be more polite to open the shutters to-morrow and return his salutation? Having decided to do this, she was invaded by so sweet an emotion that she put off the moment of going to bed. Feature by feature his face took shape in her mind: the black, curly hair, glimpsed for a moment when he raised his hat – the deep red of lips beneath a short moustache – the country clothes with the clasp of a fountain-pen catching the light – no tie, but a silk shirt open at the neck.

Bundle of instincts though she was, she had been trained to keep a watchful eye upon her conscience. Consequently, she was at once on her guard. The first warning came when, as she was saying her prayers, she realised that she had to start each one of them over again because a smiling, sunburnt face stood between her and God. Lying in bed, she was obsessed by the thought of him, and when she got up next morning, still only half awake and haunted by the memory of her dreams, she found that her first thought was that she would soon be seeing him again. During that morning's Mass she kept her hands over her face. At siesta-time, when the trap slowed down before the house, all the ground-floor shutters were hermetically sealed.

It was at this time that the exile began to get the letters which caused him so much astonishment, the letters in which

Noémie wrote: "I miss you." Through all those days she sat in the dark room waiting until the trap should have gone by before opening the shutters and settling down to her work. One afternoon she told herself that scrupulousness carried to such lengths was, in itself, a sin. "I'm getting all worked up," she thought. The business must be settled once and for all. She would lean out of the window and return the stranger's salutation. She caught the sound of wheels and her hand hesitated at the clasp. But for the first time in two weeks the trap did not drive past.

When the moment came to give Monsieur Jérôme his valerian she went up to his room and could not resist the temptation to tell him that the new doctor had not paid his customary visit to the Pieuchons. This was no news to Monsieur Jérôme. Young Pieuchon had had a relapse on the previous evening and could no longer absorb the iodine. He had brought up a basinful of blood, said the curé. The spring is a dangerous season for consumptives. It was a matter of common gossip that Doctor Pieuchon had said some hard things to his colleague. The young practitioner would almost certainly not care to show his face in the town again.

Noémie interviewed one of the tenant farmers, and helped Cadette to fold the washing. At six o'clock she went to church to visit the Blessed Sacrament, after which, as usual, she looked in on her parents. But after dinner she complained of a sick headache and went to her room.

She began to lead a more active life. Her poultry thrived. Dressed in her Sunday finery, she took her share in the social visits which the ladies of the town exchanged with much

solemnity each year. She made the round of the farms. She loved driving along the forest roads churned into ruts by the heavy farm carts. Cadette's grandson was in charge on these occasions, and she sat beside him. Gorse bushes made splashes of yellow amid the tangle of dead bracken. Dead leaves trembled on the oaks, still clinging to the branches in the teeth of a warm breeze from the south. The neat round mirror of a mere reflected the tall pine trunks, the greenery of their tops, and the blue sky beyond. Each one of all the innumerable trees showed a fresh and bleeding wound, and the heat of the day drew out the smell of resin. The notes of the cuckoo brought earlier Springs to mind. As they bumped over the uneven surface the boy was constantly flung against her, and then they laughed like a couple of children. Next day the young woman complained of stiffness, and the agent was left to complete the survey of the estate. Except at Mass no one saw her again until the day of Jean Péloueyre's return.

XII

SHE was waiting for him at the station. Her organdie frock was like a flower opening in the sun. She was wearing cotton mittens, and on her bare neck a cameo showing two cupids struggling with a goat. Several children were

amusing themselves by walking along one of the rails. The whistle of the little train could be heard long before it came in sight. Noémie wanted her emotion to be one of joy. Absence had given a softened outline to her memory of Jean Péloueyre's features. She had, as it were, fashioned her husband anew that he might no longer be repulsive to her. The image she retained of him had been subtly retouched. So strong was her desire to love him that she felt actually impatient to clasp the unreal Jean Péloueyre in her arms. If round the budding softness of her body desire had hovered, lighting upon other faces than his, she could truly call God to witness that never once had she permitted so much as one disloyal thought to enter her mind. She felt, now, quite sure that she would reap her reward, that the man who got out of the train would be a different husband from the one she had sent upon his travels with so keen a sense of happy release.

Jean Péloueyre appeared at the door of a second-class carriage. He certainly was different from what he once had been. The weight of his suitcase was almost too much for his weak muscles, though Cadette's grandson took it from him without difficulty. As he leaned on Noémie's arm, he seemed a little unsteady on his feet. "My poor Jean, you're *ill*!" He, too, found it difficult to recognize his wife in this strange young woman, so vastly had his absence improved her. She showed a full-blown brilliance. The contrast between them was even greater than it had been in the priest's parlour, when she had been a woman in her glory, and he a stunted little male. Their appearance evoked a good deal of whispering, and Jean felt ashamed to be seen by the man at the newspaper stall, by the stationmaster and by the local porter. "I

ought to have sent the carriage to meet you. Why didn't you write and tell me you were ill?"

Noémie got his bed ready, washed his face and hands, spread a white cloth on the night-table, and put within reach a number of magazines which had accumulated for him during his absence, and which she had not even taken out of their wrappers. Like a poor child surprised by unfamiliar coddling, he looked at her suspiciously with his small, sharp eyes.

Monsieur Jérôme was strongly opposed to the idea of calling in Dr. Pieuchon. Kindly and gentle, as a rule, he was exasperated at the thought that anyone else in the house should dare to be ill. No sooner had his son gone to bed than he followed suit, complaining of pains all over his body, and roughly refusing Cadette's offer of assistance. Noémie went in to see him, not so much to find out how he was as to get his consent to the doctor's visit. He gave her a point-blank refusal. Pieuchon never left his son's germ-infected pillow. If she was so set on seeing a sawbones she had better send for the "young iodine fellow". She turned her head away and said that she had no confidence in him. Besides, didn't he go to see all the consumptives for miles round? Monsieur Jérôme silenced her angrily. That, he said, was his last word, and he didn't want to be plagued any longer. He turned his face to the wall, as he always did when he was feeling especially bad, heaving at intervals the most heart-rending sighs, and repeatedly muttering those "Oh God's" which in the old days had been wont to awaken Jean in the dead of night.

When Noémie returned to her room she found the servant setting up a camp bed. Nothing of Jean Péloueyre was visible on the pillow but a pair of gleaming red eyes, two flushed cheeks, and a sharp nose. He stammered out an explanation: said he felt cold in the big bed, that he had always preferred a narrow one, that he thought it unwise for them to sleep together – at least until a doctor had examined his chest. She would have liked to protest, to pretend that she was disappointed, but not a word could she summon up. She kissed his damp forehead, but he turned away his head, finding the gratitude expressed in that caress quite intolerable. Quietly, sadly, the hours passed. Stretched in his world of silence, he slept, and woke only when he heard the tinkle of a teaspoon against a saucer. Though he was not seriously ill, Noémie supported his shoulders while he drank, and he drew out the process so as to feel for as long as possible the warmth of her arms against his neck.

Twilight fell. The church bell began to ring. From the stable-yard came the voice of Cadette's grandson crying "Coom oop, old gel," as he harnessed the horse. The door was pushed open by Monsieur Jérôme. He had slippers on his bare feet and was wearing a dressing-gown covered with medicine stains. Ashamed of his ill temper, he had come to beg their pardon, though he pretended, as a reason for his visit to be so anxious that he could not wait a moment longer without being reassured. At his orders, Cadette's grandson set off to fetch the "young iodine doctor". Jean Péloueyre protested. He was a bit tired, that was all. A few days' rest would put him right. The doctor wouldn't understand why he had been sent for in such haste.

Noémie sat in the shadows. She did not speak a word, but listened to the sound of wheels growing fainter. Without a shudder, without a sob, she wept. An April shower was whipping the windows, hastening the fall of darkness, but neither husband nor wife called for the lamp. At long last Cadette brought a light and set the table for their evening meal close by Jean's bed. While they were eating Noémie asked him whether his historical researches were finished. He shook his head, and she did not return to the question. The sound of the trap reached them from the yard. Jean Péloueyre said: "That's the iodine doctor." Noémie got up and remained standing at some distance from the lamp. She could hear the murmur of voices and the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and it was as though she were listening to an approaching storm. Cadette opened the door and he came in. He looked fatter than Noémie remembered. He was what was known locally as a "personable chap", with his black hair and high colour. He had elongated eyes like an Andalusian mule, and he turned them boldly on Noémie, tracing the lines of her body with a lingering thoroughness. His thoughts, too, had been wandering, and very much in her direction! She felt too nervous to move from her patch of shadow, and was actually shivering.

He, meanwhile, was busy examining his patient. "D'you mind unbuttoning your shirt?—a handkerchief will do, madame. . . . Now count thirty-one, thirty-two, thirty-three. . . ." The light from the lamp fell on collar-bone, shoulder-blades and ribs . . . on all Jean's pitiful exposure. . . . There was no reason to be alarmed about Monsieur Péloueyre, but the state of his lungs ought to be very care-

fully watched. . . . The doctor prescribed a tonic and some cacodylate injections. Now and again he glanced at Noémie. Could he be thinking that she might deliberately have inveigled him into the house? It was, after all, rather an extraordinary thing to make a doctor drive six miles on a dark night just to listen to the chest of an exhausted man! He stayed on some time. Speaking in his rather thick accent, he denied that he had ever claimed to be able to cure so advanced a case of tuberculosis as young Pieuchon with iodine treatment. His drawling, rustic voice filled the room with a sense of something massive, something masculine. Noémie felt herself to be the object of a gaze that, as it were, dribbled from beneath the man's saffron-coloured lids. The impression she made on him was that of a silent ghost. He concluded what he had to say by remarking that the best they could hope to do was to forestall the onset of the disease. Monsieur Péloueyre, he pointed out, was a rich breeding-ground for bacilli. "He is not so much tubercular as *potentially* tubercular. . . . The late Madame Péloueyre died of consumption, did she not?"

. . . The medical talk came strangely from lips better suited to dispense kisses than scientific comments. He must certainly keep a very careful watch on the patient. This he said, hoping that she would ask him to repeat his visit. But Noémie said nothing, and he got up. Without further beating about the bush, he asked whether Monsieur Péloueyre would like him to come again, if only for the purpose of giving him his injections. "What do *you* say, Noémie?" She made no reply, and he, thinking she had not heard, repeated the question: "Would it be a good thing, Noémie, if the

doctor came again?" This time she did answer. "It's really quite unnecessary," she said, and so uncompromising was her tone that Jean was afraid that their visitor might feel offended. He declared, therefore, that the decision must rest with the doctor. That fine upstanding young man showed not the slightest sign of embarrassment, but promised to come immediately should they see fit to send for him. Then Noémie took the lamp and led the way out of the room. She went quickly down the stairs, conscious of his warm breath on the back of her neck. The trap was standing in front of the door. The doctor climbed into it without getting so much as a glance from her. Cadette's grandson made a clucking sound with his tongue. The night wind blew out the lamp which the young woman was holding high, and she stood there in the dark, on the threshold of a dead house, listening to the sound of the wheels slowly dying away.

That night she did not sleep at all. Jean Péloueyre, in the camp bed, was restless, muttering broken phrases. She got up to tuck him in, and laid her hand upon his forehead without waking him, as she might have done to the child that she would never bear.

XIII

TWO days later Jean Péloueyre resumed his former habits. He crept out of the house during his father's siesta, kept a watchful eye open for magpies, and came home as late as possible, after paying a brief visit to the church on his way back. Noémie was already losing her gloss. He noticed the dark shadows round her melancholy eyes, and how, when they looked at him, they expressed only a gentle humility. He had hoped that his period of exile from the marriage bed might have had the effect of reconciling her to his proximity, but she continued to fight desperately in an attempt to overcome her sense of disgust, and the effort was wearing her out. Often she would call out in the night, begging him to come to her. When he pretended to be asleep she would get up, go over to his bed, and kiss him – as saints, once upon a time, were in the habit of kissing lepers. No one can tell us whether the stricken wretches rejoiced to feel upon their sores the warm breath of the Blessed. But Jean Péloueyre would wrench himself free from her embraces. It was he, now, who cried aloud in tones of horror: "Leave me alone!"

The high garden walls were half hidden under a dark riot of lilac. The dusk was filled with the scent of syringa. Cock-chafers boomed in the light of the sinking sun. One May evening, after the Litany, the curé made an announcement. "Your prayers are asked," he said, "for the success of a

number of young persons in their examinations, for the happiness of several young married couples, for the conversion of the father of a family, and for the recovery of a young man now lying gravely sick. . . ." All knew that he was referring to young Pieuchon, now *in extremis*. The June lilies bloomed. Noémie noticed with surprise that Jean no longer took a gun with him on his walks. He said that the magpies knew him too well, that the sly creatures wouldn't let him come within range. She began to fear that these expeditions took too much out of him. He returned from them, now, no longer with a look of animation on his face, but pale and exhausted. He pretended that his lack of animation was due to the heat. One night she heard him cough repeatedly. In a low voice she said: "Are you asleep, Jean?" He told her that his throat was a bit troublesome, that there was nothing really wrong with him, but she noticed the effort that he made to keep from coughing, and with what little success. She lit a candle, and saw by its light that he was bathed in sweat. She looked at him in an agony of fear. His eyes were closed, and his mind seemed concentrated upon the mysterious working of something deep within him. He smiled at his wife, and she was tormented by the spectacle of so much gentleness and calm. In a low voice he said: "I'm thirsty."

Next morning he had no trace of fever: indeed, his temperature was, if anything, subnormal. She felt reassured. It would have comforted her to know that he wasn't going out after luncheon, but there was nothing she could do to prevent him. Her importunity seemed to get on his nerves, and

he kept on looking at his watch, as though anxious not to be late for an appointment. Monsieur Jérôme made a joke of the whole business. "You'll get her thinking that you're off to meet somebody!" To this Jean made no reply, and the hall echoed to his quick steps. The sky was tarnished with storm-clouds. It was as though the silence of the birds had struck the trees to stillness.

All that day Noémie sat at one of the ground-floor windows, nursing her fear. At four o'clock the church bell began to strike a series of single notes, widely spaced. She crossed herself, because the sound meant that somebody was at the point of death. She heard a voice out in the square saying: "It's young Pieuchon they're ringing for. He almost slipped out this morning." Heavy rain-drops were making little holes in the dust, so that it gave off the smell of stormy twilights. Because her father-in-law was still sleeping, she went to the kitchen and chatted to Cadette about Robert Pieuchon. The old woman was deaf and had not heard the passing-bell. She said that the "young master" would be sure to bring the latest news, and when Noémie showed surprise heaved a deep sigh and added tearfully that she was sure the "mistress" didn't know anything about it, because otherwise she would have stopped the "poor young gentleman" – and him so delicate – from spending all his afternoons with the Pieuchon lad, as he'd been doing for more than a month now. He'd forbidden his old Cadette to breathe a word to a soul. Noémie pretended that the news did not surprise her. She went out. It had stopped raining, and a dusty wind was buffeting the heavy clouds.

She walked in the direction of the doctor's house. Death

had already closed its shutters. Jean Péloueyre appeared on the threshold. Although there was a sort of a blight over the day, he seemed dazzled, and blinked his eyes. He did not notice his wife. His clay-coloured face gave him the appearance of one not of this world. Instinctively he went towards the church and entered it. Noémie followed him at a distance. The damp chill of the nave caught at her – that earthy chill, as of a newly-dug grave, which envelops the living when they go down the steps into old churches which are slowly settling beneath the heavy hand of time. Once more she heard the cough that had woken her the night before, but now it was echoed and endlessly repeated by the vaulted ceiling.

XIV

JEAN PÉLOUEYRE had asked that his bed might be taken to one of the ground-floor rooms opening on to the garden. Whenever he found difficulty in breathing, the iron bedstead was pushed out into the verandah, and there he would lie, watching the patches of blue sky between the leaves contracting or growing larger. An ice-machine had been installed, because, except for plain, cold milk he could swallow almost nothing but a little sweetened ice. His father came to see him, but would stand all the time at a safe distance, smiling. It may be that Jean would have preferred the

darkness of his room, where his sufferings would not have been so plainly visible: but he had chosen to die in the garden, that Noémie might be the less exposed to infection. Morphine made him drowsy. Rest! Rest after those horrible afternoons at young Pieuchon's bedside, listening to the dying man's despairing outbursts as he thought of all that he was leaving – riotous nights in Bordeaux; dancing to a mechanical piano in roadside cabarets; bicycle expeditions, with the dust clinging to his thin, hairy legs, and that feeling of being all-in; above all, the kisses of young women.

The Cazenaves spread a rumour that it was only Monsieur Jérôme's meanness that kept from his son the beneficial effects of a warmer climate, or of treatment in a mountain resort. But, quite apart from the fact that Jean was the last man in the world to wish to die away from home, Dr. Pieuchon had given it as his opinion that nothing was so good for consumptives as the forests of the Landes. He went so far as to festoon the sick-room with pine branches, as for some religious Feast, and had bowls filled with resin put round the bed. At last, having come to the end of his own medical knowledge, he called in his young colleague, only to have his view confirmed that Jean Péloucyre's system could no longer stand up to massive dosages of iodine.

Although Noémie received the good-looking young man with an air of complete indifference, she could not but notice how he turned pale whenever he looked at her, or if their hands happened to touch. At each meeting she took a positive delight in the knowledge that nothing in the world had any meaning for her now but the presence of her husband in his sick-bed. But perhaps, deep down in her heart, she was

conscious of the young male who had gulped down bait, hook and all, and was unperturbed only because she knew that whenever she had a mind to do so she could lay him on the bank beside her, alive and twitching. . . .

Jean Péloueyre would not let her kiss him, but liked to feel her cool hand on his forehead. Did he believe now that she loved him? Assuredly he did, for he was heard to murmur: "Be thy Name for ever blessed, O Lord, for that thou hast let me know the love of a woman before I die. . . ." And, as once on his lonely walks, so now, he pondered endlessly one single line of poetry, and, weary of saying his Rosary, while Noémie was feeling his pulse, would mutter over and over again, in a low voice, Pauline's outburst: "*Mon Polyeucte touche à son heure dernière* – and smile. Not that he thought of himself as a martyr. People had always said of him that he was a "poor creature", nor had he ever doubted that they were right. Looking back over the grey waters of his life, he felt strengthened in his self-contempt. What stagnation! But under that sleeping surface had stirred a life-giving freshet, and now, having passed through life like a corpse, he was, on his death-bed, as a man reborn.

One evening, the curé and Doctor Pieuchon stayed so long in the hall that Noémie went out to them to complain bitterly about their conspiracy of silence. Why had she and her father-in-law never been told of Jean's daily visits to the consumptive? The doctor hung his head and pleaded in excuse his ignorance of Jean's state of health. Himself a man of infinite kindliness, how should he have felt surprise at a devotion which he would have shown without thinking twice

about it, and especially when his own son was its object? The curé's defence was more aggressive. It was Jean Péloueyre himself who had enjoined silence, and where a priest's penitents were concerned the most scrupulous tact was necessary.

"But it was you, Father, who urged him to make that fatal trip to Paris. . . ."

"Was it only I, Noémie?"

She leaned against the wall, picking at a hole in the plaster – which was painted to look like marble – and making it larger. The sound of coughing reached them from the bedroom, and the flip-flop of Cadette's slippers.

The curé spoke again:

"I did what I did only after a deal of praying. We must love the ways of the Lord. . . ."

He put on his heavy coat. In his secret heart he was wrestling with conflicting emotions, and spent sleepless nights shedding tears over Jean Péloueyre's fate. In vain did he tell himself, over and over again, that the sick man had made a will in Noémie's favour, and that it was Monsieur Jérôme's intention, once the poor boy was dead, to give the house and as much of his property as he could to the young woman – on condition that she never remarried. The curé was a man of scrupulous conscience, though a little too much inclined to meddle in the lives of others, and he questioned with relentless rigour the motives which had led him to act as he had done. He had quite sincerely believed that there was every chance of the marriage turning out happily – and, *sub specie aeternitatis*, could anybody doubt that he had been right? After all, what had *he* got out of the business? As a

good shepherd should, he had been concerned only for the well-being of his flock. Each time that he thus sat in judgment on himself, he ended by pronouncing absolution, but that did not prevent him from endlessly reopening the enquiry. He dreaded lest he might have lost the power to distinguish between justice and injustice, nor could he help feeling oppressed by a sense of uncertainty when it came to evaluating his own actions. He felt humbled, and less and less, now, did he attempt to assume the airs of priestly infallibility. When celebrating daily Mass he no longer let the train of his cassock hang free, and he had given up wearing the three-cornered biretta which distinguished him from his humbler brethren of the cloth. One by one, all his petty vanities fell from him. He felt no pleasure at the news that, though he was not senior priest, the Bishop had bestowed on him the right to wear a hood over his surplice. How came it that he, a guardian of souls, should ever have cared about such trivialities? The only thing that mattered to him now was to get clear in his mind the part he had played in this drama. Had he really been an obedient servant of the Lord, or was the real truth that a poor parish priest had usurped the functions of the Eternal God?

Meanwhile, every evening a trap rattled over the frosty roads, carrying the young doctor homewards. The moonlight filtered down through the close-set tops of the pines, scarcely impeded by their interlacing branches. The dark and rounded summits of the trees hung in the sky like a flock of birds struck motionless. Every now and again the stocky shadows of wild boars crossed from verge to verge of the

road, a few hundred yards in front of his horse's head. The trunks thinned out round a patch of ground mist that shrouded a stretch of open grassland. The road dropped into the ice-cold exhalations of a river-bed. The young man, wrapped in his goatskin and shut away in a small world smelling of fog and tobacco smoke, knew nothing of the stars that twinkled above the tree-tops. He kept his nose to the earth, like a dog on the scent. When he was not thinking of the kitchen fire in front of which he would soon be drying himself, or of the soup laced with wine that was awaiting him, his mind was busy with Noémie. There she was, within reach of his hand, yet he had never touched her. "All the same," said the sportsman in him, "I've winged her: she's wounded." He knew instinctively when a female victim had been brought to bay and was begging for mercy. He had heard the cry of her young body. He had possessed many women – some, forbidden fruit, some, the wives of men and not discarded bits of rubbish like that wretched Péloueyre. Winged now, and less capable of resistance than most, was she to be his only failure? Naturally enough, while her husband was getting on with his dying she would observe the decencies, but what was it, before the man had fallen so desperately ill, that had held back so succulent a partridge whom he had already half succeeded in hypnotizing? What was the emotional influence that had kept her lurking in the shadows, out of range of the lamp? Some different kind of love? He did not believe that she was particularly religious-minded. He thought he knew her type. He had already measured swords with the curé when he had been out after another of his lambs. Religious women were adepts at the

game. They made no bones about the venial sin. They would flutter about the flame, scorching a foot, and then, at the last moment, would slip through one's fingers, as though twitched by an invisible thread to the confessional.

He made his plans for the days ahead when Jean Péloueyre should have "kicked the bucket". "I'll get her all right," he told himself. And smiled, for he had the patience of the people of the Landes, whose method in matters of sport is to lie hidden till the birds come within range.

XV

FORTUNATELY for Jean Péloueyre, who had to fight for every breath he drew, the summer's heat grew less intense. The frequent storms of September turned the leaves red. Cadette's grandson brought the sick man some early mushrooms smelling of forest loam, and provided distraction by showing him ortolans snared at dawn which he would fatten in the dark and serve, later, drenched in old Armagnac. Coveys of wood-pigeons gave warning of an early winter, and it would soon be time to set decoys in readiness for the shooting season. Jean Péloueyre had always loved the autumn, feeling in his heart the call of the harvested millet-fields and of the wild heathland known only to the lonely pigeons, the sheep and the winds. When, at dawn, the window was thrown open to ease the patient's breathing,

the smell of the air brought a reminder of those melancholy homecomings in the October dusk when he had been out shooting. But he was not allowed to make his last long journey in peace.

Noémie did not realize that we owe a debt of silence to the dying. Just as in the old days she had been incapable of concealing her disgust, so now she could not suppress the evidences of remorse. Insatiable in her desire to be forgiven, she moistened his hand with her tears. In vain did he say: "I, and I only, Noémie, chose you out. . . . It was I, and I only, who showed you no consideration. . . ." She shook her head, blind now to everything but that Jean was dying for her, that he was a great-hearted, noble-minded man, and that she would love him truly if only he would get well. She would pay back a hundredfold the tenderness which she had learned to treasure so jealously. How was she to know that even before he struggled half-way back to health the new bond between them would have begun to work loose, that she could love him only so long as he was at death's door – *quand il touchât à son heure dernière?*¹ She was very young, very ignorant, and sensual. She did not know her own heart. But its feelings were genuine enough, and she had made an offering of them to God. Clumsily, she demanded from the dying man the word that would have lightened her burden of remorse. But these scenes sapped his courage, so that he wished, above all things, not to be left alone with her. This he often would have been (for Monsieur Jérôme was chained to his bed by a conspiracy of ailments) had it not been for

¹ I have repeated the French phrase because it is a deliberate echo of the line from *Polyeucte* already quoted – TRANSLATOR.

the young doctor's devotion. It amazed Jean Péloueyre that a stranger should be so attentive. Though he could not talk, he found comfort in the man's presence.

One afternoon at the end of September he woke from a long spell of dozing to see Noémie in a chair by the window. She was asleep. Her head had fallen back, and he could hear her untroubled breathing, as of a child. He closed his eyes again, only to open them once more at the sound of someone at the door. The doctor came in very quietly. The idea that he might be expected to utter a word of welcome made Jean a coward, and he pretended to be still asleep. The young man's shooting-boots creaked. Then there was silence, a silence so complete that Jean was tempted to steal a look. His friend, the stranger, was standing close to the unconscious woman. He did not at first bend over her, but was almost imperceptibly leaning forward, and his strong, hairy hands were trembling. . . .

Jean Péloueyre closed his eyes. He heard Noémie's deep tones: "You really must forgive me. . . . You took me by surprise, doctor. I think I must have been asleep. . . . Our patient is not so well to-day . . . this weather is so exhausting. Look, not a leaf's stirring. . . ." The doctor replied that a south-westerly breeze was blowing, and Noémie said: "A wind from Spain always means that there's a storm on the way. . . ." But the only storm of which there was a sign was foreshadowed by this pale young man, frenzied with desire, whose eyes seemed to be as heavily overcast as the sky. Noémie got up and went over to Jean, putting the iron bedstead between herself and the man whose brooding gaze was fixed upon her. His voice, when he spoke, was thick:

"You must look after yourself, madame . . . if only for his sake." "Oh, I can stand up to anything; I'm as strong as a horse and never have any trouble about eating and sleeping. . . . I just can't understand how people can die of grief. . . ." They sat down, with the width of the room between them. Jean Péloueyre seemed still to be dozing. Without moving his lips, he murmured to himself, stressing the caesura: "*Mon Péloueyre touche à son heure dernière. . . .*"

It was as though he were lying in the arms of Autumn, wrapped about by her veiling mists, and drawing in the fragrance of her tears. He had less difficulty in breathing, and occasionally took a little nourishment. But all through those days he was suffering as he had never suffered before. Still alive, he stood on the very brink of death. Of Noémie he had no doubts, but could not help wondering what weapon she would find to use against the handsome young man when the land of shadows should at last have swallowed her husband up. The sad ghost of a dead man cannot keep apart those who are predestined to love one another. But he showed no sign of the terror that had him in its clutch. He pressed the doctor's hand with a smile. How dearly he would have loved to live on, merely to join battle with this rival, to see himself preferred above him! What dark madness was it that had bred in him the wish to die? Even without Noémie, without any woman at all in his life, how sweet it would have been to drink in the air! How much more delicious is the dawn breeze than the touch of loving hands! . . . Drenched with sweat, nauseated by the smell of his own sick-bed, he looked at Cadette's grandson standing outside

the open window with an offering of the first woodcock . . . Oh, those shooting mornings! Blest magic of the pines with their tufted tops of faded grey against the blue of the sky, with their look of humble folk caught up in glory! Deep in the forest, a streak of green grass, of mist and alders, must even now be marking the course of a stream stained yellow by the sandstone of its bed.

Jean Péloueyre's pines formed the vanguard of that immense army which bleeds its life away between the Ocean and the Pyrenees, dominating the acres of Sauterne and the torrid valley where the sun is a real presence in every shoot of every vine. . . . With the passing of the years, Jean Péloueyre would have worried less about the state of his heart, because ugliness, like beauty, is smothered up by age, and he would at least have had for his delight the yearly return of the shooting season, the freshly gathered mushrooms. Past summers glint in bottles of Yquem, and the sunsets of dead years set red gleams in the Gruau-Larose. Sitting before the roaring fire in the kitchen, a man can read, while all around the heath is drowned in rain. . . .

Noémie was saying to the doctor: "There's no point in your coming back to-morrow."

And he replied: "Certainly I shall come. . . ."

Did she understand? How could she not? Had he ever declared himself? Would Jean Péloueyre die without knowing the issue of this battle which was being fought out beside his bed? It was as though someone, realizing that the poor man was slipping away from the world without suffering overmuch, had hastily contrived a series of bonds which he could break only at the cost of prodigious efforts. But break

they did, one by one, until at last he was ready for the final plunge. His passions died first, and a day came when he could give to all the selfsame smile, the selfsame tribute of gratitude, undimmed, unqualified. Not now was it lines of poetry that he repeated, but: "It is I: be not afraid . . ."

The rains at the end of winter drew a curtain about the shadowy room. Why should anyone worry whether Jean Péloueyre were suffering, since, for him, suffering was a joy? The only signs of life that reached him now were the crowing of cocks, the jolting of waggon wheels, the summons of the church bell, the vague rustle of rain upon the roof, and, at night, the hoarse cries of preying birds, the screams of murdered animals. The last dawn of his life showed at the window. Cadette lit the fire and the room was filled with its resinous smoke. It seemed the very life-breath of the blazing pines which, so often, on torrid summer days, had been blown into his face from off his native heaths. It touched his dying body. The d'Artiaills insisted that though he could still hear, he could not see. Monsieur Jérôme, in his dressing-gown, all marked with medicine stains, stood by the door, a handkerchief pressed to his lips. He was crying. Cadette and her grandson were kneeling in the half-light. The voice of the priest seemed to be forcing open invisible doors with the pressure of propitiatory words: "*Go forth, Christian soul, into life everlasting, in the name of the Father who made thee, in the name of the Son who redeemed thee, and of the Holy Ghost who sanctified thee, and in the name of Angels and Archangels, of Thrones and Dominations, of Principalities and Powers. . . .*"

Noémie fixed on him her ardent gaze, saying to herself: "He was beautiful. . . ."

The townspeople confused his passing-bell with the ringing of the morning Angelus.

XVI

MONSIEUR JÉRÔME took to his bed. The mirrors in which Jean Péloueyre had so often seen his own wizened face reflected were masked with sheets. They dressed his body as though for High Mass. Cadette even put a felt hat on his head and a prayer-book between his hands. The kitchen was filled with the sounds of preparation, because forty people would be sitting down to dinner. Several farmers were keening round the hearse like the professional mourners of ancient days. It was the first time that the curé had ever officiated at a really grand funeral. A pair of gloves and a penny wrapped in paper were given to each guest. It rained during the service, but later the sky cleared, and it was fine until they all got back from the cemetery. Deep in the earth Jean Péloueyre lay waiting for the resurrection of the dead, in the dry, sandy soil which mummifies and embalms its corpses.

Noémie Péloueyre smothered herself in crape for the space of three years. Her great sorrow made her, quite literally, invisible. She went out not at all except to Mass, and never crossed the square until she had made sure that nobody was about. Even when the first hot weather came she wore about

her neck a tight collar edged with white, and fear of gossiping tongues kept her from buying a black dress of too glossy a silk.

About this time word went round that the young doctor had been converted. He was seen at Mass on a weekday, having looked into the church between two professional visits. Whenever the curé was asked to make some comment on this event, which must have been highly gratifying to a parish priest, a smile showed on the thin-lipped mouth, with its look of having been buttoned up, but he said nothing. Perhaps his authority and power of persuasion had grown less, because he utterly failed to get Monsieur Jérôme to alter the clause in his last Will and Testament which laid it down that Noémie must not marry again. Similarly he failed in his efforts to modify the rigours of a mourning which he held to be excessive. Monsieur Jérôme took much pride in the knowledge that he belonged to a family whose widows never left off black, and the d'Artiaills showed much zeal in their endeavours to keep Noémie swathed and swaddled. That was why, on winter dawns, when it is very dark in the church, the young doctor could no more pick out the widow in her sable draperies than she could see her husband through the obliterating stone on which she kneeled each day. He saw no more, at most, than the radiance of a young face sparkling with youth, in spite of fasting Communion mornings, and the trials of a cloistered existence. The day after the Anniversary Mass, when it became known through the length and breadth of the little town that Noémie Péloueyre was determined never to lay aside her mourning, the doctor's Christian feelings broke down. He avoided not only the

church but his patients as well. Old Dr. Pieuchon heard a rumour that his young colleague was drinking heavily, and that he even got up during the night to take a swig at the bottle.

Monsieur Jérôme had never been so well, and his daughter-in-law had a good deal of leisure on her hands. She gave a considerable amount of attention to the estate, but the pines needed very little watching. The sensible, repetitive nature of her religion did not take up much of her time and was nourished on a minimum of devotional reading. Scarcely capable of genuine meditation, she entertained a faith that was largely a matter of formulae. Since there is scarcely any poverty in the resin country, and since the duty of marshalling once a week the squalling Children of Mary round the harmonium, made but a limited inroad on her days, what else was there for her to do than to conform to local custom, and find amusement in a moderate preoccupation with questions of food? In the third year of her widowhood she began to grow fat, and Dr. Pieuchon found it advisable to prescribe an hour's walking exercise each day.

One afternoon, when the weather was beginning to get hot, she went as far as the farm known as Tarteume. Feeling rather overdone, she rested for a while on the grass bank at the side of the road. All about her the gorse was humming with bees. Horse-flies and other noxious insects which swarmed in the heather bit her ankles. Though she was a strong young woman, she was conscious of a feeling of oppression round her thudding heart, and the thought that there lay almost two miles of a hot, dusty road through a

recent clearing in the woods between her and home obsessed her to the exclusion of all other thoughts. She had a feeling that the endless miles of pine-trees with the resin oozing from gashes in their red trunks, and the vast stretches of sand and burned-up heath, would hold her prisoner for ever. In her uneducated and ignorant mind something that resembled Jean Péloueyre's tormented questionings took shape. What more natural than that a poor woman dying of thirst in this world of smouldering ash, in this life of utter solitude, should raise her eyes and stretch her hands to the cool waters of Eternal Life?

She wiped her damp hands with her black-edged handkerchief, and kept her gaze fixed on her dusty shoes and the ditch where young bracken fronds looked like opening fingers. But at last she did look up, and caught full in her face that whiff of rye-bread which she had come to regard as the very life-breath of the farms. At once she was on her feet, trembling. A tilbury which she recognized at once, was standing in front of the house. How often, peering through the closed shutters of a window, had she not stared, with more of love than any sight of the stars would have woken in her, at those gleaming axle-caps! She shook the sand out of her dress: some farm waggons jolted past her: she heard the cry of a jay. In a cloud of horse-flies she stood there motionless, her eyes fixed upon the door which, in a few moments, a young man would open. With parted lips, and a feeling of tightness in her breast, she waited – like some humble and submissive animal. When, at last, the farmhouse door was pushed ajar her eyes searched the deep patch of shadow in which someone was moving. A familiar voice,

speaking patois, was prescribing enormous doses of iodine. . . . He appeared. The sun set every button of his shooting-jacket aglow. The farmer was holding his horse by the bridle. He was saying that this was the worst season of the whole year for heath fires, because everything was already dried up, there were no green growths in the underbrush, and the absence of rain meant that the heather was never damp. . . . The young man gathered up the reins. Why did Noémie retreat? Some power kept her from running to meet the man who was coming in her direction, and dragged her backwards. She plunged into the heather that met above her head. The brambles tore at her hands. For a moment she paused, listening to the sound of wheels upon the road she could not see.

Fleeing thus, she was thinking, no doubt, that the town would never accept in silence the prospect of her abandoning the respectable status of widowhood, that there existed in Monsieur Jérôme's will a clause which would always keep the d'Artiaillhs from consenting to what Madame d'Artiailh referred to as a "crazy match". But would not Noémie's instinct have swept away such obstacles if a law higher than any instinct had not caught it by the throat and strangled it? Small she might be as a human being, but she was condemned to greatness. Born a slave, she had been called to a throne and must exercise regal powers. Do what she might, this rather fat, middle-class woman could not avoid a destiny that had made her greater than herself. Every path but the path of renunciation was closed to her. At that moment, standing in a cloud of flies among the pine-trees, she knew

that loyalty to the dead would be her humble glory, that it was no longer possible for her to turn her back on Fate. Across the dry heath she ran, until, at last, worn out, her shoes filled with sand, she flung her arms about a stunted oak whose brown leaves were still unshed, and quivered in the hot breeze – a black oak which had about it something of the look of Jean Péloueyre.

La Motte, Vémars, July:
Johannet, Saint-Symphorien,

September 1921.

GENETRIX

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC

GENETRIX

Translated by
GERARD HOPKINS

LONDON
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

Génitrix was first published in 1923

***This book is made and printed in Great Britain
for Eyre & Spottiswoode (Publishers) Ltd., 15
Bedford Street, London, W.C.2, by the Stanhope
Press Ltd., Rochester.***

TO MY BROTHER

DOCTOR PIERRE MAURIAC

**(Professeur Agrégé à la Faculté
de Medecine de Bordeaux)**

**I confide these sick creatures
with feelings of affectionate admiration.**

F.M.

GENETRIX

•

I

"SHE'S asleep."

"Come away – she's only pretending."

In this wise, at the bedside of Mathilde Cazenave, did her husband and her mother-in-law whisper together. She could see, through her lashes, on the wall their huge commingled shadows. Walking on tiptoe, they made a creaking progress to the door. She heard their footsteps on the echoing stairs, followed by the sound of their two voices, one shrill, the other hoarse, filling the length of the downstairs passage. Now they were hurrying across the icy waste of the entrance hall which separated the wing where Mathilde lived, from its twin, where mother and son occupied adjoining rooms. A door slammed in the distance. The young woman drew a breath of relief and opened her eyes. Above her head was the rod, shaped like an arrow, from which depended, round the mahogany bed, curtains of white calico. The nightlight revealed a few bunches of the blue flowers with which the wallpaper was spotted. On the table a green tumbler of water edged with gold began to shake in response to the shunting of a locomotive in the nearby station. The shunting stopped, and she could catch the murmurs of the late spring night (as, when a train comes to a halt in open country, the traveller becomes aware of the chirping of crickets in a strange land). The 10 p.m. express roared by and the old house shuddered. The ceiling trembled, and somewhere, in the loft or in one of the empty rooms, a door

must have blown open. Then the train rumbled across the iron bridge spanning the Garonne. Mathilde, all ears, played a game with herself, which consisted in listening to the metallic din until the very last moment before it died away. Very soon it was drowned in the whisper of the rustling trees.

She dozed off, then started wide awake. Once more her bed was trembling, not the rest of the house this time, but only her bed. Only after a few seconds had passed did she realize that body and bed were shaking. Her teeth were chattering, though already she felt hot. The thermometer lying by her pillow was just out of reach.

The movement ceased, but the sensation of heat mounted within her like a lava flood. She felt as though she were on fire. The night-wind bellied the curtains and filled the room with the mingled smells of syringa and coal-smoke. She remembered how, two days before, as she lay drenched in the blood of her miscarriage, she had dreaded the quick exploratory touch of the midwife's hands upon her body.

'I must be over 104. . . . They wouldn't hear of anybody sitting up with me. . . .'

She stared with dilated eyes at the flicker of light upon the ceiling, and lay there cupping her unformed breasts in her two hands. She cried out in a loud voice:

"Marie! . . . Marie de Lados! . . . Marie!"

But how could the old servant, Marie - known as "de Lados" because she came from the market-town of Lados - who slept in one of the attics, possibly hear her? What was that black mass near the window, that crouching animal, seemingly gorged and somnolent, but perhaps waiting to

spring? A moment later she realized that it was nothing but a raised wooden dais. Her mother-in-law had had one put up, years ago, in every room of the house, so as to make it easy for her to follow the movements of her son when he was out, whether making the "round" on the north side, pacing the path that ran along the southern boundary of the garden, or expected back by the east gate. It was on one of these contraptions, in the small drawing-room, that Mathilde one day during her engagement had seen the old woman's huge body rise in a sudden fury; had watched the feet stamping with rage and had heard the voice crying:

"You shan't have my son! You shan't take him from me!"

The mounting lava in her body grew chill. She sagged beneath a weight of infinite weariness. She felt bruised and beaten all over, incapable of stirring a finger, unable even to unbutton the neck of her nightgown and so give air to her sweating body. She heard the squeal of the door that opened on to the front steps. This was the hour at which Madame Cazenave and her son, armed with a lantern, were in the habit of crossing the garden on their way to visit the secret room which had been built close to the labourer's cottage, and the key to which never left their keeping. She could imagine the nightly scene—each of them waiting for the other, and the talk going on behind the door with the heart-shaped aperture cut in the wood. Another cold fit seized her. Her teeth chattered. The bed shook.

She groped with her hand for the bell-pull—an ancient contrivance which had long been out of working order. She tugged at it and heard the scraping of the wire along the cornice. But no bell sounded in the depths of the darkened

house. Once again she felt burning hot. The dog in its kennel underneath the steps started to growl. Then it broke into furious barking because somebody was walking along the narrow lane which ran between the garden and the station. She said to herself: 'How terrified I should have been if this had happened yesterday!' In this rambling house that was always trembling, the french windows of which were not even protected by shutters to the ground, she had known long nights of lunatic terror. Many were the times she had started up in bed crying: "Who's there!" But she was not frightened now. It was as though no one in the world could reach through the blazing furnace to touch her. The dog was still growling though the sound of footsteps had ceased. She could hear the voice of Marie de Lados: "Quès aquo, Péliou!" followed by the noise made by Péliou as he thumped the steps with his tail in high good humour and Marie tried to quieten him in patois: "Là ! là ! tuchaou !" Once again the flame withdrew from her burned-up body. Her sense of overwhelming fatigue drifted into a state of peacefulness. The illusion came to her that she was stretching her bruised and battered limbs on the sand of the seashore. The idea of praying never entered her mind.

II

FAR from where she was lying, in the small drawing-room next to the kitchen, beyond the entrance hall, mother and son sat, though it was June, watching the flames of a log fire flicker and fall. A half-knitted stocking lay on Madame Cazenave's lap. With one of the long needles she was scratching her head, which showed patches of bald scalp between the strands of dyed hair. From time to time Fernand paused in his occupation of cutting aphorisms from a popular edition of Epictetus with his mother's scissors. This former high-school boy had decided that a book which should contain the sum of all the wisdom taught to man since man had begun to live upon the earth must be capable of revealing to him with mathematical certainty the hidden truths of life and death. Strong in this conviction, he was making a methodical collection of didactic sayings on every conceivable subject. Only in this occupation of "cutting out" could he recover that sense of tranquillity which he had known as a child. But on this particular evening neither mother nor son could rid themselves of their secret thoughts.

Fernand Cazenave jumped up and stood there on his long legs, listening.

"I think I hear her calling."

He shuffled in his slippers feet to the door. But his mother was at pains to call him back:

"Surely you're not going out into the hall again? I heard you cough three times this evening."

"She's all alone."

What, she asked, did he think could happen to her? Such a lot of fuss about an "accident"!

He gripped the old woman's arm and told her to listen. They could hear nothing but the noise made by a locomotive, the song of a nightingale in the darkness, and the creaking of the old house in response to the rattle of shunting trains in the nearby station. It would not begin trembling again until the passing of the early-morning express. But sometimes, in addition to the regularly scheduled movements of traffic, long lines of freight-trucks would set the earth shaking. Each time that happened the two Cazenaves would start awake, light a candle, and look at the time.

They sat down again, and Félicité, hoping to divert her son's attention, said:

"You were going to cut out the reflection you read to me this evening: don't you remember?"

He did remember. It had been from Spinoza, and ran roughly: "Wisdom lies in meditating not on death but on life."

"It's good, isn't it?"

Because he had a weak heart, the terror of dying dictated his choice of maxims. Instinctively, too, his mind, more used to dealing with figures than with ideas, picked out such as it could grasp with the minimum of effort. He began to walk up and down. Several relief maps hung against the green wallpaper. A sofa and a number of chairs upholstered in black leather gave the general impression of a waiting-room. The windows were festooned with long narrow strips of wine-coloured material. The lamp on the top of the desk

illuminated an open ledger and a wooden bowl containing pens, a magnet and a stump of black sealing-wax. Monsieur Thiers smiled from the interior of a crystal paperweight. When Fernand turned and came back towards his mother he noticed on her pallid, puffy face the hint of a strangled smile. He threw her a questioning glance.

She said: "It wouldn't even have been a boy."

He protested that Mathilde couldn't be blamed for that. But the old woman merely wagged her head and, without raising her eyes from her knitting, announced that she had "taken the measure of" that little school-marm from the very first. Fernand, who had resumed his seat beside the small table on which a pair of scissors gleamed among a litter of clipped sentences, took his courage in both hands.

"What woman *would* you have approved of?" The angry glee of the old woman broke into words: "Certainly not of her!"

She had made up her mind on that point from the moment of their second meeting, when the feather-brained little bit of trash had actually dared to interrupt Fernand with a "You've told us that already" – just as he was beginning on his favourite story about the only time he'd come a cropper at school, when he had walked straight into a trap laid by the examiner without so much as seeing it, and how he had carried off the whole affair that evening with a magnificent gesture by going to the Opera in a white tie and tails to hear *Les Huguenots*. . . .

"And a lot more which I won't bore you with."

But the little nitwit had soon met her Waterloo. Only two months after his marriage the dear boy had gone back

to the little room, next to his mother's, which he had occupied as a child, and the interloper had been left almost entirely to herself in the other wing. She had been of no more importance in the house than Marie de Lados until the day came when she'd shown cunning enough to take a leaf from the book of those women who, during the Terror, had escaped the scaffold at the last moment by declaring themselves to be with child.

At first the slut had won hands down. She had become sacrosanct in Fernand's eyes. He had been almost bursting with pride to think that one Cazenave the more was about to be ushered into the world. He thought as much of his "name" as any lord could have done – a fact which caused constant exasperation to Félicité, who had been born a Péloueyre – "one of the best families in the Landes" – and hated to think that when she had become a Cazenave in 1850 her husband's grandmother was still going about with her head tied up in a handkerchief. For the first five months of the girl's pregnancy she had just had to put up with the situation – though she'd been busy enough on the sly! The enemy *might* have produced a living man-child. . . . Thank the Lord, though, the midwife had said from the very first that the prospective mother was physically malformed and would almost certainly have an "accident".

"I know you so well, darling. A daughter would have meant nothing to you. The very sight of her would have plunged you in gloom. She would have been just as much worry and just as much expense as a boy. In the first place you'd have had to have a nurse, because Mathilde could never have fed the child herself. She's useless for anything

like that. *I* was up and about a week after you were born, and didn't wean you until you were eighteen months old. Then I began all over again with your poor brother Henri . . ."

He got up, kissed her on the forehead and said with a solemn air:

"You were made to be the mother of heroes!"

Then he went back to his chair, and a few seconds later the snip-snip of the scissors began all over again.

"Tell me, Fernand, what would you have done with a little girl?"

The old woman pressed her point hard, not sparing herself to make the most of her triumph:

"Can't you see now that she would have brought up a daughter to hate us?"

He sat staring into nothingness with his round, prominent eyes, as though trying to focus the image of that tiny ghost, of that tenuous bugbear existing in his mother's ingenious mind. But, not being gifted with imagination, he could see nothing.

He could not see the little child whom, at that very moment, his wife was conjuring into a fancied existence to console her for having to die in a lonely room. The tiny blood-stained bundle that her elderly attendant had whisked away might have grown to be the living, breathing creature whose lips she thought she could feel at her breast. What would it have looked like? Lying there, racked with fever, she saw in her heart a baby face unlike any she had ever known – a face of no great beauty, an ailing little face with the same birth-

mark at the left corner of the mouth that she herself had had. 'I would have sat beside his bed always until the express had gone by, for it would often have frightened him.' She would have shut herself and the child within the borders of a kingdom not of this world, and those who hated her would have been unable to cross the frontier. Her sick brain in which the blood pulsed was obsessed by a question to which there could be no answer: Does God know what sort of tree would have grown from seed that has died? Does God know how those eyes would have looked in which the flame of life has never flickered? Surely, surely, one would meet in the world of the dead all those thousands of pre-existing beings, would know what the little bundle of flesh might have become, what it had the potentiality to become? . . .

But here Mathilde's thought could go no further. The fiery tide was ebbing, the fever making pretence to drain away from the shivering body drenched with a sticky sweat, a prey to that nothingness which is the ante-room to death. She felt as though she had been shouldered aside by some savage beast. Ah! perhaps at any moment now it might return! . . . Stretched on her back, she waited for the shivering fit to begin again, watched for the signs of its approach. But it did not come. She gazed into the depths of her being as into a tell-tale sky when one hopes, yet hardly dares to hope, that the storm is moving away. Perhaps she was going to live after all! Hot, sluggish tears wetted her cheeks. She clasped and kneaded her sweating hands: "Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection sought thy help in vain. . . ."

She was cast upon life's foreshore and could hear once again the night sounds of the world of men. The breath of darkness was stirring among the leaves. Great trees were murmuring beneath the moon, but no bird waked. A huge wave of fresh, pure wind, born of the ocean and roaring its way above innumerable trees, and then across the stunted grape-shoots, had taken a final sweetness from the garden's scented limes, and, dying, now broke at last upon the drained, exhausted face.

III

GR^EAT though her weakness was, it held a sense of sweetness. The only hint of violence came from the beating of her heart, though its mad racing brought her no pain. She was *not* going to die. Restored once more to life, never again would she let her enemy strike her down. As long as another pregnancy was possible she could force her enemy to lay down her arms. To get the better of her mother-in-law, *that* was the only thing that mattered! It would be mere child's play to bring Fernand to heel. Where she had made her mistake was in thinking that once married she could abandon all self-discipline. And so she had too soon given rein to that spirit of ironic mockery which she had been careful to restrain during the period of their engagement. She had thought the battle won before it had been

joined. It had been easy enough, she reflected, to stir the embers of desire in a timid man of fifty by exercising her charms across the privet hedge which separated the Caze-nave house from the garden belonging to the Lachassaïgues, whose governess she was – all the easier because the plump fish had been more than ready to swim into the net. What she ought to have realized, as she followed with a watchful eye, from behind the barrier of leaves, the constant tussle between mother and son, was that the man meant to use her as ammunition for his own purposes, that, once safely in his power, she would be no more than a weapon in the daily struggle in which they were engaged, a struggle in which, up to date, the mother had always come out on top. Lying, this evening, in a deep well of exhaustion, she made up her mind that from now on she would control her fits of mocking laughter, would blunt the point of the goad with which she had driven to frenzy a man who had grown used to being adored. She forgot that she was the product of a wretched and penurious past, that she had deliberately grown a tough skin against adversity, had fashioned for her use a sword of irony, had built a wall of mockery between herself and the world.

As a small girl, living in a humble house on the Boulevard de Caudéran – the kind of house known in Bordeaux as a “lean-to” – she and her young brother, Jean, had indulged, even in those far-off days, in secret jokes at the expense of their schoolmaster father when he looked up with a fixed and faraway gaze from the pile of exercises which he was busy correcting. The shaded lamp cast its restricted beams

on his thin hands and on the sheets of paper covered with childish scribbles that lay beneath them, shining with a strange and greenish radiance on the bent face, and making it look as though it had been carved in stone. It was only later that Mathilde and Jean came by the knowledge that their mother had not died in Bordeaux, as they had been told, but in a distant land where she had been living with a husband who was not their father. Their laughter had been innocent of malice, because no groan from the man beside them – fate's victim, cornered and at bay – had reached their ears.

It had been a glory fraught with danger that had come the way of the "intellectual" with a beard as neat and cared-for as his style, when, in the course of a series of ten lectures on "The Sufferings of René", given to a class of young Bordeaux ladies, he had won the heart of a certain Mademoiselle Coustous (the niece of a shipowner whose father had been ruined on the turf). But it had been beyond his powers to protect her from the renewed offensive of a young man from her own social world. So completely innocent had the professor been in the whole affair that several members of the Coustous family – though they had all refused to be present at the wedding – showed a willingness, after his betrayal, to return his greeting when they happened to meet him in the street. Later, as the result of mental strain brought on by a succession of worries, trivial in themselves but cumulative in their effect, he had become so run down that even the correcting of school exercises had been too much for him to cope with unaided. It was then that Mathilde, herself a student, had begun to help him; she, too, who had supported him each morning as he climbed into

the tram at the Croix-Blanche terminus, and had gone with him as far as a side-street behind the school buildings which he took in preference to the main approach to the front entrance, because there was less danger of his meeting the morning procession of day-boys. Motionless on the kerb, she would watch him walk away unsteadily towards the class-room where, in all likelihood, he would have to start the day's work by quelling some juvenile uproar. It had been an agonizing time, but her distress had not kept her from laughing when the Lachassaigne cousin – their “good angel” – said that he could not imagine why the professor had not sent in his resignation, or when Madame Lachassaigne (who, before her marriage, had been a Mademoiselle Coustous) announced that if *she* had been in their position she would most certainly have cut down household expenses and done without a maid.

Mathilde found it no less comic that both her father and their cousins should show such a marked preference for Jean, who had the face of a baby angel, curly hair the colour of molten gold, and small pointed teeth which he displayed every time that he indulged in a burst of childish laughter. He might *look* innocent enough, but it was his habit to leave the house after dark by the drawing-room window, and it was she, on those occasions, who sat up to unlock the front door when he came home in the early hours with a look of obscene secrets in the frank gaze of his eyes enlarged to more than their normal size by the physical exhaustion of his pleasures, dirty hands, shirt unbuttoned, and the mark of passionate bites on the girlish whiteness of his neck. She would let the tousled angel of the dawn into the house with never a

word of reproach, though an expression of caustic mockery would show upon her lips.

When, once, during an intrigue which he was conducting with a lady of the vaudeville stage, he slunk off to the pawnbroker with several pieces from the household's modest store of table silver, she said not a word either to her father or to the Lachassaignes. Everything, she thought, was all right when he redeemed his pledges and put them back into the sideboard drawer with an air of such sweet repentance that, stranger though she was to all manifestations of demonstrative affection, she could not refrain from kissing the dear, angelic brow – though it was somewhat less unsullied now than it had been in April, and showed a number of pimples. Repentant or not, the angel continued to slip out of the house every night all through that fatal spring, and because he was not sufficiently immaterial to pass through stone walls Mathilde still sat up to let him in. Sometimes, with a furtive look in his eyes, the angel would refuse to go to bed, but would stand jingling a number of gold coins in his trouser pocket and then suddenly spill them in a shower on the table, remarking that there was plenty more where they came from, though there most certainly was not. He smelt, in those days, of tobacco, cheap scent and the frowstiness of unmade beds. He took to humming to himself:

I'm here at your feet,
But you don't know, my sweet,
Whether I love you or hate you.

She would beg him not to wake their father, and then he would make her go into the kitchen and hunt around for

what food she could lay her hands on. Rather to her surprise, she derived a kind of bitter pleasure from these midnight feasts. She understood very little of what he told her. Temperamentally opposed to all this purulence of wasted youth, she remained impervious to his charm, but sat listening to his wild talk until the sound of the first tram reached their ears in the shivering dawn.

Finally, a scandal blazed up, though it was quickly smothered, thanks to the headmaster, to the Lachassaignes and to the Coustous. Mathilde never knew what it was all about though she realized that the police were involved, and that a deal of gratitude was owing to the Lachassaignes for shipping Jean off to Senegal, where there was a branch of the Coustous business. Her father lingered on for several months in a state of semi-consciousness. The Lachassaignes said that for his sake, as well as for that of everybody else, one could only hope that the end would not be long delayed. When at last he did die they all declared that it was a blessed release. Madame Lachassaigne gave it as her opinion that in Mathilde's place *she* would not have insisted on so much mourning, seeing that, as always, the family would have to foot the bill.

This they did, and more, for they took the orphaned girl with them to their country house near Langon, where they always spent the hottest months of the summer. It became Mathilde's job to see that their gawky and rather backward daughter did not get overtired. They said of their destitute cousin that she was "really very tactful and knew how to keep herself in the background". Certainly, no sooner was dinner over than she seemed to melt into thin air, and even during the meal was remarkable, if at all, for her colourless

hair, her unseeing eyes and her drab clothes. Every description of dirty linen was washed in her presence, her host and hostess seeming to ignore the mild-mannered stranger who pretended to be blind (though she saw) and deaf (though she heard).

In their house Mathilde indulged to the full, though secretly, that taste for ironic mockery which, later, with the Cazenaves, was to be the cause of her undoing. At that time she was all aridity, all dryness, a wasteland without water. She thought that she could judge a gentleman by the standard of her father, who had been betrayed by his wife, mocked by fate, and less well rewarded for his services than a taxi-driver (he had actually hoarded cigarette-ends in a tobacco jar). She was quite sure that love was merely what she had seen embodied in the person of that brother with the look of a bedraggled angel whom she had been used to find at night cast up high and dry outside the peeling front door of the family "lean-to".

Her attitude to the Lachassaignes was one of repressed and concentrated cruelty. Their sole preoccupation, she decided, was food, and succulent food at that. Husband and wife were embedded in succulence. They might have been taken for brother and sister so alike were their fat faces and their greasy chaps for ever running with rich juices. She compared them to two jellyfish whose expanding tentacles could reach no further than their daughter Hortense who, already "has enough pearls" – as she confided to her diary – "to conceal the scrofulous rash upon her neck." She was filled with contempt for them at mealtimes, as she sat there listening to their slow talk interspersed with the rumination of large mouth-

fuls of rich food. "Only after they have swallowed do they resume the thread of their conversation. They are the kind of persons who never sacrifice nourishment to words." She devised an epitaph for them: "They ate and put a bit aside."

But on the other side of the privet hedge the gambollings of quite another couple had already begun to divert her mind from the bitter amusement which she found in contemplating the Lachassaignes. This particular hedge bounded the south path which was Fernand Cazenave's favourite refuge from the maternal eye. Glancing nervously to right and left, the fifty-year-old mother's darling would saunter along it, puffing, like a guilty schoolboy, at a surreptitious cigarette. If Félicité happened to catch sight of him from one of the wooden daises which she used for the purpose of spying on his movements, he did not always have time to get rid of the butt in one of the shrubberies. There had been an occasion when Mathilde saw him secretly devouring a melon – forbidden food because of its heating properties – and received full in her face the segments of rind which he flung over the hedge. She wrapped the tell-tale objects in a newspaper, hurried round to the Cazenaves, told Marie de Lados that someone had been robbing her kitchen garden, and then hastened back to her point of vantage behind the privet, whence the distant rumblings of the breaking storm were already audible.

But quite often it was she who was spied upon. She pretended not to see Cazenave's stocky head and shoulders showing like the stone bust of some pagan god between the branches of the medlars, the nut trees and the privet. Not that she was tempted to build castles in Spain on the strength

of the hot eyes that brooded upon her with such maniac fixity. Young women in the Garonne valley grow used to being stared at with hungry lechery. But Monsieur Lachasaigne seized the opportunity to be heavily jocose at her expense. He made up a story to the effect that Fernand Caze-nave had been asking him about the young woman, about her tastes and her character, that he wanted to know whether it were true that her mother had been a Coustous. . . .

It was only natural, therefore, that Mathilde, in the light of these revelations, should call to mind the odds and ends of talk which had reached her from across the hedge (for mother and son, in close escort, like two ancient frigates, would constantly walk together along the south path, vanishing from view at its further end, to reappear when they had completed their round).

To-night, lying in the darkness, feeling so weak that it was beyond her strength even to stretch her hand to the eiderdown, she could still, in memory, recapture the sound of their voices. The shivering fit had not begun again, but she felt that her limbs would never emerge from the depths of fatigue in which they lay submerged. Quite possibly she would not recover from this condition of bruised and battered exhaustion. Her body had been broken, she thought, not by illness, but by the blows rained upon it by the man and his old mother, who at this very moment, probably, were sitting in the study which had been for her the scene of so many depressing evenings: 'She's taking the logs off the fire, pushing the chairs away from the hearth, putting the wire screen on the grate. She's saying to her son: "I won't

kiss you now: I'll come and tuck you up when you're in bed." . . .

She remembered how her heart had started beating one day when, crouching behind the privet, she had awaited the gathering storm already announced by the confused sound of their two voices. At last the pair had come into view at the far end of the path. It was he, at first, who had talked the louder, accusing Madame Cazenave of having made him decline an offer made him by the local Radical Association at the time of the last elections. She had not even allowed him to retain his seat on the General Council. . . .

They had stopped a few paces from Mathilde's hiding-place. The old woman said: "All I cared about was that your life shouldn't be cut short . . . d'you understand that . . . cut short?"

"What nonsense! I saw Duluc yesterday, and he assured me that I am as strong as a horse, said I should live to bury the lot of you. What you mean is that you want me to live for ever tied to your apron-strings. That's about the size of it!"

"You, as strong as a horse! Duluc was making up to you. Why, ever since you had scarlet fever when you were ten there's been every kind of thing wrong with you, and half the time the doctors didn't know what the trouble was. What about the chronic bronchitis you developed when you were doing your volunteer service . . . to say nothing of the ailments you've brought on yourself since?"

"You've always been against my marrying, because you don't want to lose your hold on me. . . . You've never

had but one idea in your head, to plan a nice solitary life for me."

"You married? . . . That would be a sight for sore eyes!"

"It's no use your trying to get out of it. . . ."

The old woman shrugged her shoulders. She was out of breath and was mopping her red face with a pocket-handkerchief. Mathilde knew now, though she hadn't known then, what it was that had made his mother feel so safe. Often, after a day spent in bickering, it had been Fernand's custom, armed with a suitcase, from which all the necessities would be missing, to catch the evening train into Bordeaux, there to meet the woman to whom Madame Cazenave always referred as his "hobby":

"I'm sorry to say that Fernand's got a hobby in the rue Huguerie," she would say, adding: "But he has her well taped. I don't need to worry about him. He'll never let her make ducks and drakes with his money."

But the "hobby" never succeeded in keeping Fernand with her for more than a few days. He would come back shivering – because he had forgotten his flannel undervest – dropping with sleep because he could never get any rest in a double bed – furious to think how much he had had to spend on tips and restaurants – worn out and depressed because that particular form of exercise was thoroughly bad for his nerves.

"I'm catching the ten-o'clock train to-morrow morning."

"Well, have a good time and enjoy yourself."

Mathilde could remember the tone in which this exchange of threat and reply (so rich in consequences for her) had been

barked out. Scarcely had she heard them than she made a secret resolve that she, too, would take the ten-o'clock train.

No use deceiving herself now. So far the shivering fit had not returned, but the sensation of cold was so intense that she half believed it to be the effect of the night-wind and of the icy chill produced by her sweat-soaked limbs. She, and no one else, had been responsible for the wretchedness that had come to her. She had had no feeling of tenderness for this middle-aged man. A sort of mole-like instinct had set her burrowing blindly for a way of escape from her life of dependence. The worst of a humble situation is that it compels us to see everyone with whom one comes in contact solely in terms of their usefulness, to demand only that they shall serve *our* needs. That one preoccupation had dictated her attitude to those about her, to every incident with which she was confronted. She had picked them up like cards and turned them over, always hoping that a trump had been dealt her. Whenever she had found a door ajar she had pushed it open, careless, in her feeling of captivity, whether it would prove to lead into open country or to the edge of an abyss. But on that morning when, saying that she was going to the dentist, she had taken a second-class ticket to Bordeaux, and sat down opposite Fernand Cazenave, she had never really imagined that her manoeuvre would actually succeed. . . .

There was no room, now, for doubt. Once again the mortal storm swirled down, shaking and racking her, driving deep into her very being as though intent on tearing this young and living tree from its roots. She remembered how, when as a small girl, she was feverish, she had thought it fun to feel her teeth chattering. Now she could enjoy the

sensation to her heart's content. How the bed was shaking ! It hadn't shaken like that when the fit came on her for the first time. From the heart of her cyclone she was aware, with curious lucidity, of the peaceful darkness that lay about her possessed and tormented body. She could hear in the withdrawn and sleeping world the flutter of birds awakened by the moon. So faint was the breeze that it scarcely swayed the topmost branches. She was overcome by a feeling of utter loneliness. Why was her father not here, sitting, as he had always done in the days of her childish ailments, beside the bed, pushing back her damp hair with a clumsy hand ? She could remember how he used to sit, correcting exercises by the faint glimmer of the nightlight until it was time to give her her medicine. The dead cannot stretch a helping hand from the tomb to those they have loved in life. She cried aloud the name of her brother Jean, who, maybe, was still alive somewhere. She should have been at greater pains to keep in touch with him, even though he did leave her letters unanswered. . . . In what sea had that poor, leaky vessel foundered ? . . . She had stopped shivering, and was now in the burning fiery furnace of a terrible onset of fever, blazing from head to foot like a young pine-tree. She could see upon a barren stretch of shore, beneath a burning sky, a heap of rotting matter, now covered by the spume of an incoming wave, now left bare by the ebb, only to be covered once again by the rushing waters. The face was horribly decomposed, but she could see that it was her brother Jean's. On no other man's name, but only on his, did she cry in her delirium. She had loved nobody and been loved by none. Her body that had never been consumed by love would now

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soon be devoured by death. The rending annihilation of passion had not been for her a foretaste of the last utter dissolution of mortality. Her body would die without ever having known its own secrets.

IV

ONE hour later old Madame Cazenave struck a match and looked at the time. For a few moments she lay listening intently, not to the dark intensity of the waning night, but to the breathing of her beloved son on the other side of the wall. After a brief and silent debate she got out of bed, slid her swollen feet into a pair of old slippers, and, wrapped in a purple dressing-gown, left the room, carrying a candle, went downstairs, walked along a passage and crossed the empty spaces of the hall. She was now in enemy territory. As softly as she could she climbed the stairs, but even so the treads creaked under her feet. Once she stopped and listened; then moved on. Outside the door she extinguished the candle which had now become useless, and strained her ears to catch sounds coming from within. The staircase was filled with the grey light of early dawn. Not a cry, not a groan reached her, but only a noise that was like the muted rattle of castanets. She knew that what she was hearing was the chattering of teeth. The noise continued for a while. Then came a cry on a rising note. . . . Only God

could read the expression on the face of this listening Medusa whose rival was lying, behind the door, at her last gasp. She was sorely tempted not to enter, to let the inevitable take its course. . . . She hesitated and moved away; then, changing her mind, turned the handle.

"Who is it?"

"Only I, my dear."

The room lay now revealed not by the nightlight, but in a pure and icy radiance filtering through the Venetian blinds. Mathilde watched her nightmare moving towards the bed. Through the chattering of her teeth she cried:

"Let me alone! I don't want anything! It's just a touch of fever!"

The old woman asked whether she would like some quinine.

"No, nothing – nothing at all – only to be left alone, to turn my face to the wall. Go away!"

"As you will, my dear."

She had no more to say. She had done her duty. There was nothing with which she need reproach herself. What must be must be.

Mathilde, who had raised her two hands in a gesture of execration even after the enemy had fled, held them still for a moment in front of her eyes, appalled to see how purple and congested they had become. Her heart was beating wildly, like a strangled bird whose wings move in a rapidly weakening flutter. She tried to look more closely, but could not see that already her nails had turned blue. Even in this final moment of her agony she did not believe that the night

upon whose threshold she was standing would be with her now for all eternity. Because she was utterly alone, she did not know that she had reached life's ultimate limit. Had she ever been loved, the clasp of arms would have made her realize that she must tear herself from the close embraces of this world. No need for her to break free who never had been held. No solemn voice whispered in her ear the name of a Father who might, perhaps, be terrible, nor threatened her with a mercy that might, perhaps, be inexorable. There was no tearstained face for her to leave behind, nothing to mark for her this slipping into the shadows. She died quietly, as those die who are unloved.

V

“YOU hear what Duluc says?”

The banisters shook under the doctor's weight. The door of the dead woman's room had been left ajar. Marie de Lados could be heard blowing her nose. After thirty years in practice Dr. Duluc knew all about puerperal fever. Was Cazenave proposing to teach him his business? Useless to get a nurse in forty-eight hours after a miscarriage had occurred.

“Besides, a nurse couldn't have done anything. It wasn't puerperal fever that had carried the poor thing off. It was her heart let her down. If *that* had been all right she could have

struggled on for three days at least. I've known cases who put up a good fight for more than a month. Don't you remember that when I tested her heart – that time when she was down with influenza – I told you the aorta was affected?"

The big staircase window made a dirty smudge on the blue of the sky. Fernand Cazenave shook his mother's hand from his arm.

"You hear what Duluc says, darling?" she said again.

For the third time, like a man talking in his sleep, he repeated:

"I ought to have had a nurse."

He held out his hand to Duluc without looking at him, then slipped into the dark, elongated shadow made by the crack of the half-opened door, and saw Marie de Lados bending over the bed. Sitting down a little way off, by the table, he realized that she was busy plaiting the still living hair. The shunting of a locomotive set the glass of water trembling. Out on the landing Madame Cazenave and Duluc had raised their voices and Fernand occupied his mind by trying to hear what they were saying. . . . Had he ever seen a dead body before? Yes, his father's, thirty-seven years ago, in the ground-floor room which had later been turned into the study. How calm his mother had been! He remembered how she had kept on saying while she kissed him: "This is the beginning of a new life for you. . . ."

She came back into the room, holding a number of telegrams in her hand, and saw her son sitting there motionless. There was a sound of voices in the garden. The Sisters had come from the Convent, several of them. Would Fernand like to have them brought up? He made a negative move-

ment with his head. She touched his arm.

"Come, darling. Don't stay here; it's bad for you. You know how impressionable you are."

He shook her off without even turning his head. She went downstairs to send the visitors away, and then returned. She begged him to get some rest, employing all the usual arguments.

"What's the point in wearing yourself out? . . . That won't do any good. A fine thing it'll be if *you* get ill. . . ."

He spoke at last, still keeping his eyes averted:

"What time was it when you came and listened at her door?" She said she thought it had been about four.

"You told the doctor that you heard her teeth chattering."

"What I meant was that on thinking things over afterwards I came to the conclusion that what I had heard *might* have been the chattering of her teeth."

"Why didn't you go back?"

"She had said that she wasn't in any pain, that she only felt rather hot. . . . I offered her quinine, but she refused it. I left her with my mind quite easy."

"In that case, why did you pay her a second visit at six to see what was happening?"

She made no reply. She felt upset, not because her darling son was questioning her like a judge, but because there was a note of anguish in his voice. She found comfort in the thought: 'He's not really unhappy. . . .' But what terror there was in the suspicion that he might be! Had Mathilde been alive at that moment she could not have endured the burning, brooding look with which the old woman fixed

the mortal remains that never more would be conscious of any feeling at all. . . .

She must go downstairs and see to the sending out of formal announcements to friends and relatives. Time was pressing, but she could not bring herself to leave the two alone. There was nothing in the world she would not do to break that final *tête-à-tête*. . . .

. . . And then, suddenly, she felt ashamed of her emotion. A picture from an illustrated edition of Michelet flashed vividly before her mind's eye: the picture of one of the Popes who had had the body of his predecessor exhumed, had sat in judgment on him, had passed sentence upon him, and then flung himself in a frenzy of hatred upon the corpse. . . .

Only one night, one short night, and then the undertakers would have done their work. By to-morrow the body would be encased in lead, and Fernand's gaze would beat in vain against a sealed and triple sheath. Never again, after that, would he look upon her face. But with what fervour was he looking now! Never had he gazed on anybody with so sad and silent a concentration. Once more she approached him, took his hand, and in words that were half prayer, half command, said:

"Come!"

He pushed her from him. She went to the door. How peaceful the sleeping face looked, how freed from strain and happy, as though strong in the assurance of being loved! As she went down the stairs she was in torment. But once out of the dead woman's presence, once she had begun to address the envelopes, she quickly recovered her poise of mind. Why worry? Wouldn't Fernand, from now on, belong to her and

to no one else? Marie de Lados came with a message from her son not to wait luncheon for him. She smiled, reassured by the very extravagance of the gesture. Not for long would the dead keep him from her. He was not the man to let himself be put out for a corpse. But he knew no greater happiness than to make his mother suffer. She had been wrong to try to get him away by force. Had she pretended not to care, he would already have had more than enough of gloom. . . . Putting things at their very worst, he would come down to dinner that evening, sure enough.

She had to spend the whole day in the drawing-room, where the shutters had been closed, the mirror covered, and the furniture wrapped in dust-sheets, receiving relays of women all dressed in black and all whispering behind their veils. Without exception they praised Madame Cazenave for bearing up so well. Without exception they silently hoped that at about four o'clock they would be offered *something* – if only a biscuit – either because they wanted to feel that the day had not been altogether wasted, or because the presence of death awoke in them an instinctive longing for the rites sanctified by centuries of tradition, a confused desire for those libations which serve to appease the spirits of the departed. But they had to raise the siege with their fast still unbroken.

As soon as Félicité had speeded the last of her parting guests, she asked Marie de Lados whether the master had come down yet. The servant replied that he was still upstairs, and had given instructions that a poached egg and some broth should be taken to him at seven, together with

his dressing-gown, his slippers and the bottle of Armagnac. She'd always said, she had, that the master wasn't a Péloueyre for nothing. He might pretend to lose his temper at times, but when you came down to it, there wasn't nobody better'n him nowhere. . . . So said Marie de Lados, and had had a strong feeling that she had better leave it at that, though there was nothing to be seen in the dark hall but the vague bulk of her mistress standing motionless.

"Get back to your kitchen, you old fool! . . ."

The tone in which Madame Cazenave issued this order was the same as that in which, forty years before, when Marie, at the end of her strength, had collapsed into a chair, old Péloueyre had exclaimed: "Get up at once and stop pretending!" He could not bear to see a servant sitting down. In those days Marie de Lados had even taken her meals standing, snatching what food she could get in the intervals of serving her employers. She had no right to a chair, except in the evenings, and only then on condition that she occupied herself with spinning. . . .

. . . Upstairs, they were wrapping the body of the woman whose sufferings were ended in a rough homespun sheet which other servants, long dead, had woven. . . .

Madame Cazenave dined alone. All the while she ate she was listening intently, convinced that at any moment now she would catch the sound of a creaking stair announcing the arrival of her exhausted son. Just as she was leaving the table she fancied that at last she could hear the expected noise, and at once assumed an expression of elaborate indifference. But it was only the 8 p.m. express which had made the door of the loft fly open.

"He'll have come to his senses by to-morrow evening. . . ."

She threw a shawl round her shoulders and went down into the garden. The east wind had filled it with smoke from the station, but the smell of limes and syringa was stronger than the stench of coal. The tree-tops were filled with birds settling down for the night with a whirring of wings. The old woman looked up at the Venetian blinds from behind which glimmered a funereal radiance. She muttered to herself: "There'll be nothing very fresh and sweet about you to-morrow morning, my fine lady!" As she passed the magnolia bush a nightingale took fright. The crickets fell silent in the dry and dusty paddock grass as she passed. She saw in imagination her son shivering in the dawn light beside a woman who had died the previous evening. He had always been so terrified of death. How odd he must be looking!

VI

HE certainly was looking odd. Wrapped in a dark-coloured dressing-gown, his head resting against the back of the large wing-chair, he sat gazing fixedly at Mathilde. He had already filled and emptied one glass of Armagnac, and a second stood on the small table at his elbow. Moths were fluttering round the two candles, and it was as though their shadows bumped against the ceiling. Once he spoke Mathilde's name in a voice that his mother

would not have recognized. He got up, went across to the bed, chased away a fly, and stood looking down at the spectacle of a face made beautiful by eternity. Again and again he murmured to himself in words that no ears but his could have heard: "Blind! . . . blind!" . . . not realizing that, in fact, he was seeing her for the first time now that death had wiped out all imperfections. There was nothing in the expression of her features to tell of the greed, the hardness or the strained attention of a penniless girl, for ever calculating, mistrustful and seeking shelter behind a mask of mocking irony; nothing of the hunted animal at bay, nothing that spoke any longer of grinding toil and the relentless bars of the prison-house. Had Mathilde, in her lifetime, been happy and adored, she might, perhaps, have looked as she looked now, her face submerged beneath a tide of peace, made free and at rest.

"Blind! . . . blind!" . . . In his slightly fuddled state, Fernand could hear within his heart the uprush of his anguish. In a fervour of intoxication he took this stranger to himself. The suddenly released waters of his spirit crashed through the ice of a winter that had been abnormally prolonged. Now, for the first time, when he was already in his fifties, he experienced the pain that can be inflicted by another. What most men discover while still young, he, at last, had found to-night! A bitter sorcery bound him tightly to a corpse. Again he drew close and touched her cheek with his finger. Long after he had withdrawn he could feel upon it the lingering sensation of eternal chill.

Something, he knew not what, was vanishing from the face before him. The terrible moment had come when,

looking at the dead, we say: "there's a change. . . ." He left the room and leaned over the banisters. Only the night sky lit the scene. The same train which, twenty-four hours earlier, Mathilde had heard in her last agonised struggle for life, now thundered by. The fabric of the great house trembled as it had done in those long hours of her terrified wakefulness. He remembered that he had promised her to have full-length shutters fitted to the downstairs windows. He dwelt upon the thought, finding comfort in the knowledge that he had shown her at least some kindness in those months of pregnancy. Then he went back into the room. Was he only imagining a smell, or was there, indeed, some subtle emanation from the object in its clinging shroud of sheets, that now repelled him? He threw the window wide open and pushed back the blind. He was not of those who are wont to gaze upon the stars instead of sleeping. Faced by the slow revolution of a galaxy of worlds, he had a feeling that he had been brought suddenly into the presence of a miracle – that he stood upon the brink of mystery. The restlessness that once had led him to cut sentences from printed books grew large within him. Between the window and the bed, between a universe of dead worlds and one dead thing of flesh, he stood, a lonely, living creature.

Not daring to approach the corpse again, he stayed by the window, breathing in the damp night air. The scent of growing things, the rustle of shadowy presences, woke in him the idea of a happiness he might have had, but which would remain, now, for ever unknown. He clenched his fists. He could not accept the thought of Mathilde's nothing-

ness. Had his mother entered the room at that moment, he would have cried aloud: "I don't want Mathilde to be dead!" in the same tone as, when a child, he had wanted everyone to take to their beds if he were ill, had begged for one of the horses from the merry-go-round at holiday festivities, had demanded strawberries in December or begged to be allowed to play with a real gun which could really *kill* something.

Remembering one of the sayings he had cut out which had referred to the immortality of the soul, he shrugged his shoulders. Mathilde's soul! What did he care about the soul! Were there people so idiotic as to find comfort in such fairy-tales? What he craved was the gift of her living body. What he longed for was to see upon the fearful and suspicious face that had been hers in life the sudden flicker of happiness. He, who had always been incapable of escaping from himself, even in the frenzy of physical satisfaction, realized now, too late, that what the body blindly seeks is a pleasure that lies concealed outside itself, that only by mingling its delight with the delight of another body not itself can it find assuagement. He felt upon his forehead the imprint of his nails. The sobbing cry of some creature of the night sounded so close to the house that he started back, his heart thumping. "Perhaps," he said to himself, "it is the *frégasse*. . . ." (that mysterious bird of the Landes which is attracted to houses not where death has struck, but whither it is on its way).

The night was at its peak. There would be no train now till five o'clock. No breeze would stir the deadweight of the leaves. Even from the meadows nothing came except the sleepy murmur of vegetable dreams. He went across to the

wardrobe, but started back because the horror of his own face peered at him from the mirror. It was as though already in himself the same corruption lurked as was at work already in Mathilde's body three yards away.

Again the sobbing night-cry sounded – so close that it might have been in the room with him. The creature must have settled on the chimney, perhaps even in the flue! He stared at the black iron plate which closed the hearth. Had he not heard the beat of sinister wings? He shrank back towards the door, defeated. He would return to his mother. Not for nothing had the old woman in the other wing remained seated on her bed; had kept herself from running to the help of her ungrateful son. She, too, had caught the night-bird's note, and thought contentedly: 'He won't be long now: I know him!'

Fernand, in a panic, ran out on to the landing. A light, was moving, filling the staircase well. Marie de Lados appeared, holding a lamp. She was wearing her Sunday best. Round her head was a black silk scarf, from beneath which protruded the elongated lobes of her ancient ears. It had occurred to her that the master must be feeling sleepy. He took the lamp from her hand and went downstairs so quickly that the flame blew out. He reached his room, undressed in the dark, and fell asleep. At almost the same moment his mother, hearing his quiet breathing from behind the wall, resigned herself to the thought that she would not be able to give him a good-night kiss.

At the other end of the house Marie de Lados was sitting upright in her chair, not leaning her head against its back, and casting a strange shadow on the wall. Her toothless

mouth moved rapidly. The beads of her rosary lay in the hollow of her apron like grains of corn and barley.

VII

HEAVILY veiled in spite of the heat of the morning, which was already considerable, Félicité Cazenave emerged from the garden's easternmost wicket and reached the road that ran parallel with the main line from Bordeaux to Cette. She strode ahead with her bust thrown prominently forward, her two hands crossed on her stomach, her skirt dragging in the dirt and dust. For a while she kept to the highway, then turned right towards the cemetery. She did not cross the threshold of the city of the dead, but tapped with her finger on the glass door of the keeper's lodge. A sullen voice – the voice of a man who had long ago given up all hope of a tip – answered her question before she asked it – and announced that Monsieur Cazenave had not been seen there for close on six days. She set off again, breathing heavily, but with a sense of relief, feeling that she had scored a point in her battle with the woman who was dead.

During the week following the funeral (at which he had appeared like a man in a trance, with so deep a look of anguish on his face that the neighbours had been quite non-plussed), Fernand had visited his wife's grave each morning without fail, taking with him a bunch of ill-assorted, and

short-stemmed flowers, such as might have been plucked and bundled together by a not very skilful child. But now, at last, his devotion was showing signs of weakening. A change was coming, thought Félicité to herself. She needed in some sort to be reassured, but deep down she was oppressed by a feeling of lassitude. By nature positive, she had found that her accustomed weapons were of no avail against a ghost. To produce any effect she must have living flesh on which to work. The tactics of her vanished rival, crouching, as it were, in Fernand's vital centre, and in possession of him as of some captured fortress, disconcerted her. Not that she hadn't foreseen the rancour and the hate with which this adored son would pursue her, hadn't realized that his craving to inflict a hurt on her would be tenfold magnified (even as, when a child, sitting on her lap, he had been in the habit of butting her with his knee till she cried for mercy). But nothing of the sort had occurred. Instead, he had behaved with an indifference, a spiritual absentmindedness, which put her off her game, and kept her from developing any freedom of manoeuvre.

As she pushed open the garden gate she felt tired. She was sweating beneath the heavy panoply of her mourning. Entering the garden, she was met by the strong scent given off by the old box-hedge which surrounded the pumping contraption where Grisette, the donkey, stood dozing on the pathway of trodden dung. She jabbed, as she always did, at the animal's tough hide with her umbrella. It jerked awake and into sudden movement. 'What does it matter,' she thought, 'whether he goes to the cemetery or into the fields to dream, since his mind is always dwelling on *her*.'

This morning, as on other mornings, with one shoulder slightly higher than the other, and wearing on his head a three-year-old straw hat which he had had dyed, he had left the house, dressed in a strong-smelling alpaca coat. But it was at noon, especially, when he came home and sat down opposite his mother, that his mind seemed furthest away. Nothing seemed to "take" with him. He no longer reacted to words which formerly would have put him beside himself with fury.

She settled down on the little dais behind the study window, whence she could watch his every movement, like an ancient queen dethroned. With her knitting lying untouched upon her lap, she stayed there, looking out, never for a single moment taking her eyes from the garden gate. The passing of the 11 a.m. train announced his impending return. Each day she waited for her adored son to come in, as though with his appearance the hideous spell would be broken. 'He'll come back to me all right,' thought the mother to herself: 'Men don't change after they've turned fifty.' It did not occur to her that he could have changed. He was the same small boy, prone to fits of temper, whom she had dandled on her knee. He resented the fact that Mathilde was dead. Even death could not baffle the violence of his desires.

When it became clear that he was late she stepped down from the dais and began to pace the room, saying to herself, for the hundredth time: "I must get it clear in my mind: I *did* go up: I *did* knock at her door: I *did* ask whether she was in pain, and she *did* reply that she didn't want anything. . . . Yes, but when I went into his room he was looking up the word *infection* in the medical dictionary. . . ."

So deep was she in thought that the sound of Fernand's steps in the hall took her by surprise. She heard him ask Marie de Lados whether luncheon was ready. There being a quarter of an hour to wait, he went into the garden. Félicité watched him from behind the curtain. He was standing quite still in the middle of the path. At what was he looking? She could not know that with his mind's eye he was seeing the room in the rue Huguerie where once every month his "hobby" used to wait for him. There was always a number of small Turkish towels hanging on a line in the window. She called him her old skinflint, because, do what she might, she could never get a penny more out of him than her fixed fee. Such had been Fernand's history in matters of love. . . .

He raised his eyes to the windows of Mathilde's room. 'All the same,' he thought, 'she must have known, during all those months of pregnancy, that I loved her, that I was taking her part against my mother. But she probably decided that it was because of the child. . . .'

He tried to remember the occasions on which he had treated her with gentleness; but in vain. The only thing that came back to him – and it came with the force of an obsession – was the recollection of that last trip they had made together to Bordeaux, and how ill-tempered he had been because he thought she was spending too much on things for the baby. "In my young days," he had grumbled, "a mother wouldn't have dreamed of *buying* baby clothes. She would have made it a point of honour to knit every stitch herself." Mathilde, silent and weighed down by the load she was carrying, had dragged along at his side. They had gone

into a rather better-class restaurant than those he usually frequented when she was with him. There were flowers on the table. She had unfolded her napkin and smiled, happy and relaxed at last. "We serve *à la carte* only, sir," the waiter had said in reply to his enquiry about the price of the dinner. With a furious glance at the menu he had got up and asked for his hat and coat. They had had to walk right down the whole length of the room again, past the whispering diners and the sniggering waiters. Then they had set off again along the blazing hot pavement of the Allées de Tourny. Fernand had pretended not to notice that she was crying.

He went back into the house. Madame Cazenave hoisted herself to her swollen feet and moved to meet him. "How hot you are, you poor old thing."

She tried to wipe his streaming face with her pocket-handkerchief, but he turned away.

"You're positively soaking: run away and change, or you'll catch cold."

He made no reply, and she added:

"I've laid out a change on your bed."

Moving clumsily she followed him into the study. A sudden wave of anger swept away her control:

"If you get ill, who'll have to look after you, I should like to know? I, of course!"

At this he swung round on her:

"Or, alternatively, you could leave me alone to die—too!"

She staggered under the blow and could find no answer. They crossed the kitchen, omitting their usual routine of

lifting the covers from the saucepans and peering inside, and entered the shuttered, stuffy dining-room.

"You're eating nothing."

Really worried this time, she repeated the phrase. Not to want to eat is regarded in the Landes as the sure preliminary of sickness and death. Loss of appetite is equivalent to the loss of taste for all the best that life can offer. There is only one thing left for the sufferer to do – take to his bed and wait for the end.

Marie de Lados broke in with:

"You beaint eating nothing either, ma'am."

Such failure to enjoy their food was quite different from the pretended distaste in which mother and son had indulged when Mathilde had been running the house, turning up their noses in mute agreement at everything set before them, in the hope of forcing the younger woman to surrender the reins of government.

When Félicité returned to the study she found that she was alone. The dear boy had not followed her. This had always been the time when, after coffee was served, they had sat side by side on the black leather sofa, her head on his shoulder, sharing the same newspaper, giggling like a couple of schoolchildren, starting guiltily apart when Mathilde opened the door, like two people who have been interrupted in the middle of a private conversation. She could still hear in imagination the offended voice of the little schoolmistress, their enemy, saying: "Am I disturbing you?" – and her own replying: "Oh no, we've said everything we had to say."

Such skirmishes had been the good lady's dearest delight, the very substance of her day-to-day existence. . . . Where had her darling gone to earth this time? It had been obvious, that he was at the end of his tether, and he was probably lying down. His aimless wanderings exhausted him. If he insisted on overtaxing his lungs and his heart he must take the consequences. . . . Unoccupied and miserable, she would have liked to seek him out. But what good would it do? He had got into the habit, latterly, of bolting his door against her, as though she had been Mathilde.

A beam of sunlight, slipping between the half-closed shutters, drew a bright sparkle from the frame of a photograph standing on the mantelpiece. It was a picture for which Félicité had an especial weakness. A month after the marriage, mother, son and daughter-in-law had "sat" for a perambulating artist. But just before the shutter had clicked, Fernand had dropped his wife's arm and taken his mother's. Ever since that day Félicité and her son had beamed into the room from the cabinet-size group, while the young woman, standing behind, showed an unsmiling presence and dangling arms.

Madame Cazenave could not resist the temptation to take another look at this reminder of their happy times. She went over to where the picture stood, but came to a sudden, sickening standstill when she saw that the frame was empty. Her eyes sought the table, caught by the glitter of the scissors which Fernand used for cutting out his "sayings". They shifted to the wastepaper basket. Heavens! wasn't that *her* smile, *her* thrusting nose, *her* spreading front, showing

through the woven wickerwork? She flung herself upon the photograph which had been so foully destined for the garbage can. The wretched creature had carefully cut out Mathilde's face. Doubtless he was carrying it about with him now in his notecase, against his heart. Probably it was his delight, in moments of solitude, to take it out and kiss it ardently. . . .

. . . For the past two weeks the old woman had endured everything without a murmur, but this tangible evidence of her banishment broke down her resistance. A wave of maniac fury swept everything before it, so that her gnarled and swollen fingers began to tremble. She stamped her foot just as she had done, on that day long ago, when she had cried out to Mathilde: "You shan't have my son - never!" She went to the door. Her face showed the tense, mindless expression of a woman carrying a loaded revolver or a bottle of vitriol under her cloak. Perhaps there are not different kinds of love, but one kind only. This ageing woman, deprived of the son whom once she had wholly possessed, had been dealt a mortal blow. The craving to own, to dominate, spiritually is more bitterly tenacious than the desire which urges young bodies to couple in an ecstasy of mutual ravishment and hunger.

She felt stifled, and threw the shutters open. The midday sun lay with a molten heat upon the burned-up garden. Between the dusty squares of grass the gravelled path had the colour of ashes. The puffing of a train pulling out of the station reminded her of the struggle of congested lungs for air. Blind with anger, swaying on her feet, she went out on to the landing. At each upward step she had to pause for

breath, but she forced herself to climb the stairs until, at last, she reached the room of her ungrateful child. It was empty. There was a litter of medicine bottles and a smell of urine. The sight, in the mirror, of her purple cheeks filled her with terror. Where should she run the traitorous wretch to earth if not in her enemy's lair? She went downstairs again (her ailing legs trembling beneath her), hurried along the corridor, crossed the shadowed hall, turned into another corridor, and reached at last the stairs leading to the stronghold of the all-powerful dead. For some seconds, all strength gone from her, she stood motionless outside the door, as she had done on the fatal night, and listened. But not as on that night did now the eye of God see in the expression of her old, expectant face the chasing shadows of surprise and hope. This time she stood shaking and alert, all ears for the faint sound of snoring, broken now and again by a hiccup – for the stifled breathing that she knew so well – delicious music made familiar by those many nights when, from the other side of a dividing wall, it had brought assurance of the loved one's presence. In that happy past she had been wont to lie awake, her mind and faculties so centred on the sound that insomnia became for her the sweetest of all fortune's gifts. . . . But now the power of someone dead lay like a barrier between her and her darling's slumbers. A fresh surge of anger lifted her. Blind to all else, she turned the handle.

She had to screw up her eyes. The two windows were wide open, and through them struck the savage glare of June. Some lilies, set in two vases on the table, filled the room to suffocation, as though it had been fast sealed. Between them, in a frame adorned with seashells ("A Present from

Arcachon") which was too large for it, stood Mathilde's photograph, cut with pious care from the group at which she had been looking a few minutes before. Laid out in front of it were the girl's tiny engagement ring, her wedding ring, and a pair of soiled white gloves. To complete the scene, Fernand lay slumped in the great wing-chair, his head fallen forward, struck down by sudden sleep. A bumble-bee was banging against the ceiling and the mirrors, seeking the open window. That found, its heavy drone was lost in the blazing inferno of the sky.

Félicité's boots creaked. Fernand shifted his position. She paused, then took a step towards the table, her hands outstretched in the gesture of a Polyeucte, destroyer of images. She longed to spit upon the pictured face, to tear it to shreds, to trample it underfoot. . . . but dared not. Fernand's head had fallen on his arm, which lay sprawled upon the table. All of him that his mother could see was an untidy tangle of grey hair. Her face was pouring with sweat, but it felt cold. Her sight was clouded. The blood throbbed in her ears, so that she seemed to be listening to the sea's sound in a shell. She wanted to speak, because her tongue felt heavy. She could not tell whether the sounds she heard were caused by crickets or by flies or by the throbbing of her own arteries. An invisible hand pushed her towards the bed, forced her down upon the couch where Mathilde had suffered and had died. She lay cringing there like an animal, waiting. At last the sense of heaviness lifted from her eyes, the constriction vanished from her throat. The dark bird of evil omen took wing and flew away. She breathed again. Her son was still

sleeping to an accompaniment of little choking sounds. Danger was still close at hand, and the sense of it made her sweat and tremble. But the look with which she now brooded upon the altar standing between the outspread arms of her unconscious son had less in it of hatred than of fear.

VIII

THE atmosphere which hung about the evening meal was not that to which Fernand had grown accustomed during the periods of their mutual hostility. His mother's very look surprised him. As a rule she sat straight-backed and majestic, a symbol of domination. This evening, she seemed to have collapsed, and her colourless cheeks sagged. What he felt now was not pity so much as a bored irritation at the thought of the blow with which he was about to fell her. He was afraid that she would not take it without a strident protest. Her attitude, when at last it came, was more coldly detached than he had dared to hope. What she had seen that day had, in some sort, prepared her. Consequently, she did not tremble when Marie de Lados came to ask her for a pair of clean sheets so that she could make up the master's bed in the poor dead lady's room. She handed over the key of the linen-cupboard to the servant, touched her son's forehead with her lips, and took her candle. Fernand suspected her of playing

some deep game. But no such idea was in her mind. Aware that she had already suffered betrayal in her son's heart, she felt no surprise that he should pass over to the enemy bag and baggage.

Once in her own room, however, she felt frightened by the unaccustomed silence. She seemed for the first time to be aware of the trembling of the house which, for the convenience of his business (*Northern and Local Timber Ltd.*), her husband, Numa Cazenave, had built facing the station. Left a widow, she had found comfort in the sound of her darling's noisy slumbers on the other side of the wall. They had served as a barrier between her and the perils of the darkness. Not furtive footsteps, nor the iron resonance of the great bridge across the river, nor the fury of the equinoctial gales, nor the singing of nightingales in the lilacs, had ever prevailed against the sleeper's breathing. The few hours that he needs must pass in Mathilde's room had but made sweeter the triumph of his resumed presence there next door to her. But how strange now seemed the darkness as she lay in the room where, for fifty years, she had spent her every night! The last train before the early-morning express set the windows shaking. There would be nothing more except endless lines of freight waggons, the noise of which, since the engines never whistled, sank into the substance of her dreams. Useless any longer to sleep with her lips pressed to the wall beyond which her son no longer choked and snored. Better to turn upon her other side, to close her eyes, to empty her mind of all thought. . . .

. . . Suddenly she started up. 'Somebody's walking in the garden!' Had she really heard somebody walking? At

times the breeze rustled the leaves so gently that she could swear it was the sound of footsteps. Félicité struck a match, heard no repetition of the noise, and blew it out again. But in her mind's eye she held a clear vision of the rambling house standing all exposed in the darkness with its defenceless windows. In imagination she could see a furtive face pressed to the glass, a hand, armed with a diamond, silently cutting a hole in the pane. How could she prevail upon Fernand to fit the shutters which he had refused to order when Mathilde asked him? The best thing would be to remind him of the dead woman's wish. In an access of devotion he might carry it out.

It was born in upon her that this momentary terror had been the young woman's companion night after night. Coincidence? . . . Chance? . . . The old woman shrugged her shoulders and told herself not to be a fool. But memories of servants' stories, deep buried in her mind, rose now to the surface, and older memories still, of things that had frightened her as a child. No, no, it was not true that the dead seek vengeance. Moment by moment corruption was eating ever more deeply into what remained of Mathilde as she lay in the third grave to the left against the end wall of the cemetery. Nevertheless, Félicité explored the darkness with her eyes, as though she could sense a swarm of unknown presences behind the seeming reality of things. She forced a laugh. She believed in nothing that she could not touch. She had been born in the days when only a few sandy tracks linked the Landes with the outside world. The "Terror" had driven the priests away. Her own mother had not made her First Communion until the day she was married. At the begin-

ning of the previous century the children of the Landes had had but one religion, that of the implacable and fiery sun; had known but one Almighty, the blaze that burned the pines – a swift-moving, unapproachable God who left in the wake of his progress a host of smoking torches.

Coming downstairs rather later than usual, because she had not slept until the early hours, she saw Fernand's hat and stick lying on the log-box in the hall. How was it that he had not gone out? Marie de Lados assured her that he was still sleeping. She could see for herself, the woman said, that the Venetian blinds were lowered. With her eyes fixed upon the windows, Félicité suffered as many agonies as though her rival were clasping Fernand in her arms. "I'm going mad," she said to herself. Had she ever known worse torture when Mathilde was alive? Again she formed her silent words: "You know perfectly well that she is no longer there. . . ." That might be true, yet as surely as though she were present in the body, she was holding prisoner in her bed the man who, while she lived, had fled from her. Félicité could not remember ever to have suffered such sordid misery even in the days that had immediately followed the marriage. It was then, during those weeks, that she had felt convinced of her eventual victory. A week after the wedding, while the young couple were still at Biarritz, Fernand had written her a letter which had filled her with such joy that, from having read it again and again, she could repeat its sweetest passages by heart:

. . . You were right. Only a mother is capable of understanding a man like me. All other women are as strangers. They believe they love, when, actually, their thoughts are concentrated on themselves. The man's health has to take second place to their pleasure. They think it right and proper that he should spend money like water to satisfy their most trivial whims. Women who, before they were married, never knew where to look for their next meal are always the most insatiable. You remember that hotel close to the station at Bayonne – not a very luxurious sort of place, perhaps, though you and I found it perfectly all right – well, Mathilde refused to stay there, because she said she'd seen a squashed bug, and because there was a smell of slops. We had to move into one of those places I loathe, where there's a crowd of servants who do nothing for one and then look daggers when one tips them a shilling. Mathilde thinks I'm mean, and talks about nothing but herself. She's not the slightest bit interested in anything that concerns me. And to think I used to grumble because you were always fussing! She merely laughs if I so much as mention my health. If I'm still well it's certainly no thanks to her! In the train she had a draught roaring through the carriage. She gets up at night when I've gone to sleep and opens the window. I needn't tell you that the pain in my left shoulder has started up again. She's for ever sneering at something or other, criticizing the way our family behaves, and saying that it's perfectly disgusting not to wash before going to bed – which is ridiculous, seeing that one's got to go through the whole business again in the morning! I can't tell you more than a tiny part of what I have to put up with. But don't worry, mother

dear; your son will do his duty to the bitter end.

It had been a summer's morning just like this one. The arrival of his letter had filled the old she-wolf with mingled happiness and anxiety. How sweet her memories were of the ensuing weeks! Signs of a growing disharmony had accumulated, until a day had come when, after a night the vicissitudes of which remained wrapped in mystery, he had come to her with a face as white as a sheet, and had said: "Please have the bed made up again in my old room. . . ." She had been waiting for that moment of ecstasy, not daring to hope that it would come so soon. She could see herself again as she had been that day, seated by the narrow child's bed in the carefully aired room, the bed on which Marie de Lados had piled the sheets smelling of mint and running water. . . . But now, alas! . . . The sun was burning through the mist. The birds had stopped singing, though she could hear the scrape of a cicada. The shutters rattled as Marie de Lados closed them in front of the windows. The south wind felt hot on her skin, and smelled of burning pine. Over above the Landes the sky must be overcast with smoke touched to crimson by the flames. From moment to moment the thirst of the tormented earth grew fiercer. Péliou was scraping a hole with paws and muzzle to make himself a cool shelter in which to sleep. Félicité could hear, as she had heard the day before, the throbbing of her arteries. She stood perfectly still fearing that the slightest movement might make a beckoning sign to death. She uttered a few words as a mad woman might have done, and Péliou pricked his ears, thinking them addressed to him. On the bed where Mathilde's body had

lain she saw, in imagination, her son's. Seized by a sudden panic, she pulled herself together and walked towards the sun-drenched terrace steps. The lizards' throats were pulsing and the air was filled with the scent of geranium. Just as she reached the first step one of the french windows was pushed open and Fernand Cazenave appeared. He said: "Breakfast's ready, mother."

He was alive. He stood there before her in the merciless sunlight. His straw hat was tilted over his eyes and hid his face. Her heavy old body felt light as air as she mounted the steps to her darling, standing motionless above her. But her joy was shortlived. Seeing him at close range when he took off his hat to kiss her, she had to keep herself from crying out, so ravaged did he look. The dead woman had done this to him! His lips were drained of colour as though he had been drinking vinegar: his eyes were bloodshot like those of an old dog. . . .

. . . As he took his place at table, he, in his turn, gave his mother a long look. Throughout the meal it was clear that each was made nervous by the other's presence, but while she never took her eyes from his face, he soon became absorbed in his own thoughts, drawn by some inner vision from which nothing, ever more, would turn his gaze. It was all very well for Marie de Lados to bewail the fire which was blazing over towards Landiras, saying that the tocsin had not been sounded because the blaze was too far away from the village – what tocsin that ever rang could have startled Fernand from that memory of the first night he had spent in the room where Mathilde had died?

IX

AT first he had almost enjoyed stretching at full length beneath the vaporous white wings of the bed-curtains that hung from a rod in the shape of an arrow. The windows were open and beyond them the night was breathing like some familiar presence. There was nothing to remind him of his vigil by the dead, nor yet of the bird of death. Quite the contrary, in fact, and he lay there on his back, his hands clasped beneath the sheet, his legs straight and rigid – for all the world like Mathilde as he had seen her last. He could feel himself drifting between gentle tides into the depths of an infinite repose. She was there with him, not so much as a separate entity, but within him, her body made one with his. He felt a tingling responsiveness which brought back to his consciousness their bridal nights. Slowly his thoughts took form, gathering about the hours when he had felt her frightened presence at his side. The picture thus presented to his mind's eye was at once so pitiful and so grotesque that he shook his head and groaned aloud. Like all the men of his race, and like the majority of all mankind, he should by rights have died without ever knowing the pangs of love.

Fate had played a sorry trick on him by troubling in an ageing body waters that lay deep hidden. The muddy stream had cut a sluggish channel, nor had he fully realized what was happening. His forebears had been jealous lovers of trees and vines. Numa Cazenavé had wished only that his folk

should pile upon his grave the greasy clay of a land which had been his solitary passion. When he had taken a wife he had had to ask a friend "how one behaved" with a woman. To all the vanished fathers of his line marriage had meant but one single thing – an increase in worldly possessions, an assurance of the continuity of property. The certainty of the family's survival had been their challenge flung in the teeth of mortality. In almost every case one son had been enough to perpetuate the fragile chain of life which, till the world's end, would bear the burden of a patrimony endlessly enlarged by bridal doweries and testamentary bequests. Never had love come to change the course of that single, powerful stream. Their wives, whether Péloueyres or Cazenaves, had always been the kind of women who murmur in the nuptial bed: "Hurry up now, and let's get it over." But inevitably a day would come when on one link in the chain of life a spot of rust would appear and begin to eat into the precious metal. For those who came after, for those as yet unborn, there would be but a heritage of misery.

There was horror in the mute enmity that lay between Fernand and his mother. It was from her he had received the legacy of fire, but it was her doting jealousy that had prevented him from keeping the flame alive. That he might not escape from her she had willed that he should be a weakling. Only if he were less than a man could her power remain unquestioned. She had brought him up in a lunatic distrust of women. Ever since his fifteenth year he had divided them into two categories – "the sort who want to trap you" and "the sort who give you a dose". No doubt, if he had been passionate by temperament, obstacles of this kind would not

long have kept him from doing as he wanted. But, in the first place, he came of the stock of those peasants, so familiar on the country roads of France, whom one sees walking home of an evening, arms swinging, hands empty, holding the middle of the road like kings, with, trotting behind them, a poor harassed female more loaded with baskets and packages than a donkey.

Further, because all life long his self-confidence had been kept under subjection and control, he had grown into the type of young man who, from sheer terror of not being found attractive by women, maintains that a fellow can always get the wife he wants provided he is willing to pay the price she asks. It was a matter of pride with him to hold that those who boast of getting their women for nothing do, in fact, spend a great deal more in the process than their shrewder fellows. He was fond of saying: "They know exactly where they are with me, and precisely how far in the matter of money I am prepared to go . . . that I'm not one for frills, and that they'll get no flowers and presents out of me! . . ."

But now, lying on Mathilde's bed in the darkness, he remembered how, one fine day when the noon sun was blazing on the garden path, he had seen behind the bee-loud privet a young girl's body. . . . Had it only been a question of taking a stand against his mother's authority, would he really have broken through the hedge and seized that honey-smelling prey of flesh and blood, would he really have thus plunged into a world of dangers? Doubtless the impulse had at first been born of a wish to avenge his thwarted manhood - but behind it there had lain a deeper desire. He realized

this now, now when it was too late to satisfy the latent hunger, when that selfsame prey of flesh and blood and intoxicating scent had turned to corruption and become a horrible and nameless thing . . .

He got up and moved on naked feet about the room, stumbling against the furniture. He said out loud: "She *did* love me. If she hadn't loved me she wouldn't have suffered because of me. . . ." He shook his heavy head and groaned. "No, no, love didn't enter into it. . . ." His face puckered into the same ugly grimace as when he had had one of his childish crying fits, and the tears streamed down his cheeks. For a moment he stood still, biting his nails, and said: "Was there another man?" Not until this moment had he ever been jealous, because overweening pride had kept the emotion from him. Another man in Mathilde's life? Anguish was very close to him at that moment, but he remembered something that his mother had said to him time and time again: "At least she's respectable, one must grant her that. Respectability's about the only merit she *has* got", adding, in reference to the Coustous woman who had been Mathilde's mother: "For once in a way it's not true to say like mother like daughter."

What he did not know was that when the old woman had given this grudging praise to her daughter-in-law she was remembering a certain luncheon at the Merlets, a luncheon given in honour of the young couple's return from the honeymoon, at which a master from the local school had been sitting at Mathilde's right. He was popularly credited with being a poet, and was in the habit of giving advice to

the Merlet girls who dabbled in verse. Félicité Cazenave had got the impression, while the meal proceeded, that Mathilde was drinking in every word that fell from the lips of this dark and elegant young man. Who but God could know whether the girl hadn't, for a moment, felt a lightness of the spirit, a sense of surrender, the sprouting of some deep and secret bud, a barely perceptible attraction towards this neighbour who dropped his voice to quote a line of poetry in the hubbub of the meal's end? Laughter was creasing the country faces around the table, and he, no doubt, was dreaming of a romantic love that he had learned from books. But at that moment coffee had been brought in, and Félicité had rather crudely urged him to recite something. He had refused, and she had begged him at least to write a few lines in the album in which her daughter-in-law was in the habit of copying her favourite extracts. From then on Mathilde had been on her guard. Félicité was quite incapable of concealing her wiles, and her daughter-in-law liked to think that she could "always hear the clump of her boots a mile off". The schoolmaster had not got so much as a glance out of her, and when, later, he paid a visit to the Cazenaves, the young woman had refused to come down to the drawing-room. Fernand could sleep in peace. He had never been betrayed, even in thought, by the poor creature whose sole preoccupation had been to keep the tally of their uneasy relationship, and avoid trouble.

He dismissed the subject from his mind. He saw his whole life stretch before him arid, melancholy. How had he been able to cross such wastes of sand without dying of thirst?

For years he had not been conscious of its emptiness. Only now did he feel the torment. Mathilde had died without even knowing that he *was* thirsty, and now she was dead and he lived on. If one stream had dried up, he thought, a thousand others would quickly bubble into view. What easier than to replace Mathilde? Loving now, for the first time in his life, he resented the mirage which plunged the whole world in darkness, leaving one single image only bathed in light. Corrupted from his earliest youth, he had never really grown up.

Accustomed to use all things for his pleasure, to turn everything to his own advantage, he tried to reassure himself with the thought that Mathilde had been but the occasion of his discovering a universe of delights which he could now profitably explore with another. . . . But what other? A vision formed in his mind's eye of towels hanging out to dry in a window of the rue Huguerie. . . . What others? In the contracted world of his dishonour, in the tangled strands of the sticky web which his mother, for his protection, had set about him for half a century, he struggled now, a great fat fly held captive. He struck a match and, holding the candle high, looked at himself in the glass. The cult creates the idol. Mathilde, perhaps, and Mathilde alone, might have been able to attach herself to this ageing and irritable god whom forty years of maternal adoration had formed and conditioned. Too late! He went to the window. A few drops of rain must have fallen, for he could smell the scent of the ravished earth. He lay down on the floor, flat on his stomach, his face resting on his folded arms, and there he would have stayed, had not the stiffness in his joints sent him

back to the bed. At length sleep put an end to his troubles. The first birds woke, but him they could not wake. He might have been the lifeless simulacrum of a human body.

X

IT was during luncheon on the following day that Félicité Cazenave, facing across the table the middle-aged man who was her son, found that, for the first time, she was no longer thinking of him as a piece of property snatched from her by another's hand and which she must recapture by violence. At that moment her love began to resemble the love of other mothers who demand nothing in return for what they give. Within the silent old woman, sitting there and making an effort to eat, a tumult of the soul was taking place. Possessive love had been trampled underfoot, had actually recognized the need to abandon its most sacred privileges. The only thing that mattered was that he should be happy! Had it been in her power to call Mathilde back from the country of the dead, she would have done so. The heady fumes of renunciation opened to the eyes of her devotion a perspective of blinding radiance. So strong is the instinct of self-preservation in the emotion of love when faced by the threat of complete destruction, when the earth beneath its feet trembles and the heavens above its head are rent, that it sets itself the task of creating a new heaven and a new earth.

That is the moment when she who is no longer loved murmurs to him who loves no longer: "You shall not be tormented by the sight of me. I will not be exigent. I will make my home in the shadow of your presence. I will surround you with a protection which you shall not even notice." In such a way did Félicité Cazenave, drinking defeat like wine, cast the food of renunciation to her famished passion.

She broke the silence, and in tones of supplication said:

"You're eating nothing, dearest: you must eat."

Without raising his head, he replied: "You're not eating, either."

True to his habit as a spoilt child, he added: "I've never been able to eat alone, with somebody opposite watching me the whole time."

"But I'm really very hungry, dear."

She tried to swallow a mouthful, though the effort caused a muscular contraction in her throat.

When they left the table Fernand at once moved off in the direction of the enemy wing. She called him back.

"There's something I want to say to you, my boy."

For a moment he hesitated, then, with a bad grace, followed her into the study.

"What is it you want?"

She had gone straight to the window and half opened the shutters. She turned round now, but, at sight of her son, lost her self-assurance.

"I'm worried about you. The kind of life you are leading will do you no good. You are eating your heart out, as Marie de Lados would say. You *must* find something with which to occupy your mind. . . . Go and see the members

of that Committee again. You are in the prime of life. The municipal elections will be coming along in a few months' time."

He growled out that he had given up thinking about all that for a long time past, just as she had wished. To this she made no reply, and he asked whether that was all she had to say. She took his arm, and when next she spoke there was a note of intensity in her voice:

"I can't stand by and see you just fade away. I'm not going to let you die."

"As you let her?"

She cried out that she had had nothing to do with his wife's death. How could she have foreseen that poisoning would set in? Why wouldn't he believe Duluc? There had been no reason to have a nurse.

"Besides, I *did* go to see her that night."

"Oh, I know. . . . I know . . ."

"I knocked at her door. I asked whether she was in pain. She answered that there was nothing she needed. It wouldn't have been too late, even then, to have pulled her through if her heart hadn't failed. Duluc's told you that a hundred times. 'Neither you nor I could have done anything,' he said. 'That sort of poisoning is never immediately fatal. It may go on for days. But your wife had a weak heart.' . . ."

She walked up and down the room, talking as much to convince herself as her son. She raised her voice as though wishing to be overheard by someone invisible yet within earshot. He, meanwhile, had moved away from the door, and all the time that his mother was speaking covered his face with his hands. At last he broke out with:

"It was you who killed her . . . killed her a little more with each day that passed."

She protested in a burst of anger: "That's not true! I merely defended myself, as I had every right to do. If it comes to that, we are both of us involved."

"What, precisely, do you mean by that?"

"Which of us, you or I, dealt her the shrewdest blows? Answer me!"

Fury swept through her like a fire, burning up her will to renunciation even before it had come fully to birth. It was no longer a question of sacrificing herself, but of overcoming a rebel son, of proving herself to be the stronger of the two, as she always had been.

She was shouting now.

"Take a look at yourself! No one but your mother could have put up with you for a moment! I've fought you tooth and nail for fifty years - I, your mother - and it amazes me that I am still alive to tell the tale! When *she* came on the scene, poor little wretch, I knew she wouldn't last long. It didn't take you more than a year——"

"Shut up! . . . Don't say another word!"

She recoiled at sight of his ashen face, at sight of her son's hands raised and trembling. As he came towards her she leaned against the wall. She met him in his wildness with a smile. Her whole attitude was a challenge. It was as though she were casting in his teeth those words addressed by another mother to another son: "Strike me . . . strike my womb!"

Terrified because he realized what he had been on the brink of doing, he stopped dead. Suddenly sobered, he stared

at the old woman who had borne him, on whom he had been about to lay violent hands. He saw the poor, breathless body standing there at his mercy – and all the secret tenderness of childhood burst suddenly through the hard rind of his spirit in an anguished cry:

“Mother!”

She had fallen exhausted on the sofa, and he leaned his head against her shoulder. He had run for shelter to this sanctuary of living flesh, because for him there existed no other refuge in the world. Like one in the last stages of despair, who would say good-bye for ever to the earth, yet flings himself upon her as upon the breast of a harsh step-mother and draws her scent deep into his darkened spirit, so now this man, forced to his last gasp, clung to the old woman who had given him life. And she, nerveless and crushed, tasted happiness for one brief moment with closed eyes. Only too soon he would recover his self-possession; only too soon the realization of his passing weakness would be an added grievance between them. How she wished that this moment might be eternal! Her arm was growing numb beneath the burden of his heavy head, but she knew only that she was a mother who, through winter nights, stays awake because her child cannot sleep unless it holds her hand, who remains in one position for hours together, her arm stretched over the bed's edge, suffering agonies of pain, surrendering her frozen fingers to the will of a baby executioner. For a long time, as in the days when, a young woman conscious only of the animal instincts of maternity, she had nuzzled avidly the new born child, so now, her lips remained pressed to the forehead of her ageing son. Never again would

she provoke him, never again make demands on him. Instead, she would give him back the will to live, would bear him a second time. She surrendered to the illusion that the well-beloved, in his turn, would seek, would welcome rebirth. She did not realize that, while for her the object of so much passion was there, heavy against her knees, and that his presence was all the weapon she needed to confront the assaults of destiny, he, bred up in spiritual corruption, he who for half a century had broken every toy he had been given, had just lost the last of them at the very moment of discovering its incalculable value. Well might she look at him, poor woman. Already he was getting to his feet, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. Well might she look – and listen, too, to the sound of his footsteps dying away in the house of death.

XI

SEVERAL days of released tension followed, because the sky, too, had lost something of its blazing ardour. For a whole week storms wandered backwards and forwards over a countryside that was almost emptied of human life (for it was that time of the year when there is nothing to be done but to leave grapes and sun in silent communion). Even the trains seemed to be finding it difficult to drive a passage through the dog days. Word went round that between La

Réole and Tonniens the heat had expanded the rails. At last a night came when a gentle susurrations woke both son and mother. With such eagerness were the leaves drinking in the first drops of falling moisture that it was almost an hour before the rain succeeded in forcing its way through to the crust of the burned-up world, before the earth could be transpierced and left to liberate its scents – scents that told of a desire not yet assuaged though already transmuted into joy. In that torrid land men's passions echo back the violence of the heavens, and, sometimes, too, share in its waning. At mealtimes Fernand no longer maintained a malignant silence. Not that all constraint had been lifted from the relationship of mother and son, but he did, at least, show her deference, did treat her with a deliberate solicitude, did pay her those little attentions due to an old woman. He never left her now until they had had their coffee. But she was cautious and took care not to exploit her advantage. To herself she said: "I will save him. . . ." But, alas! though he no longer treated her with cruelty, he was still bleeding because of what the enemy had done to him.

Around this scene of drama in suspense, the great trees – planes and golden poplars, oaks and tulip-trees – waved their rain-drenched leaves beneath a kindlier sky, hiding from stranger eyes the mother and her son. What is commonly said about provincial life and provincial gossip is true only of those humble folk who are forced to live cheek by jowl. Nothing is less penetrable by human eyes, nothing so breathes an air of mystery, than the walled estates so closely hedged by trees that those who live in them seem only to be in touch with one another and with heaven. It was generally

agreed in the city that the attitude adopted by the Cazenaves was right and proper. The less deeply we feel the loss a relative, the more important is it to exaggerate the trappings of our woe, and in some such terms could be interpreted the continued withdrawal of the pair.

Nevertheless, all through that rainy September Fernand went out religiously each morning, wearing an old cape with the hood pulled over his head. His favourite walk was along the lane which separated the garden from the main Bordeaux-Cette railway line. On the freight-waggon in the sidings he would read – without paying much attention to the phrase, and certainly seeing nothing horrible or ominous in it – the label which said “Men 38-40”. Then he would turn and go home. His mother waited until he was close to her, and only then tried to read the message of his shut and inexpressive face. Each day the tension in it grew less. It looked almost peaceful: so much so that at first she thought the change must be deliberate. But could he have gone on cheating her for so long? Somewhere he had found a softening influence, a source of consolation that was hidden from her. His health was better – though not because of anything that she had done!

Once, in the old days, she had dismissed a servant for boasting that she had saved Fernand's life when he had the scarlatina. Now it was a dead woman who had saved his life, and she no jealous mother could dismiss. Thus was her last prop knocked away. She was useless to him. Never, since the days of his earliest infancy, when he was already a spoilt and fanciful brat, had she seen upon his face so vague and sweet, so almost childish, a smile. For fifty years her favourite

refrain had been: "What would you do without me! It's lucky for you I'm here! If you hadn't got me I don't know what would happen!" Alas! for all the attention he paid her now she might not have existed at all, and yet, without her, in spite of her perhaps, he had once again found peace. The knowledge that they are needed prolongs old women's lives. Many of them die of the despair that assails them when they realize that they can no longer be of use. Some of them, when already at death's door, revive because a widowed daughter or an orphaned child cries to them for help. Félicité could do nothing more for her son. But, if it came to that, had she, in the days when her domination was supreme, used it in such a way as to make him happy?

At night when she could not sleep, when she lay feeling a hostile silence all around her, she would say to herself: "Any other sort of life would have killed him. If he had been left to himself he would have been dead by this time." But what did she really know of him?

The wind, sweeping above the miles of heath, reached at last the indeterminate line where the thinning pines open on to the sacred acres of the Sauterne grapes, and there, blowing aimlessly, uncertain what to grip and tear, suddenly concentrated on the garden trees which, feeling themselves seized in a rushing, wild embrace, start to sway and shudder all together.

One last function, at least, she could perform, and, by so doing, serve her heart's darling. The dead woman might work upon his ailing spirit, but over his sick body she could have no power. It still belonged to the mother from whom it had emerged into the world. Fernand obstinately refused

to see Dr. Duluc. Madame Cazenave, therefore, consulted him in secret. It was his view that she must overcome her son's dislike of food. He must be made to eat, and so "enrich his blood". Therefore, she forced herself to eat, so that he might be persuaded to follow her example. Though the state of her arteries made a light diet imperative, she stuffed herself with butcher's meat. Each time they sat down to a meal the same dialogue took place:

"You're not eating anything, darling."

"Nor are you."

"But I am. Look at me. Do have a little more steak."

"I'll have some more if you will."

In all forms of martyrdom there is an element of the sublime. No matter how degrading the manner of the death imposed, it is always life that is sacrificed.

Félicité could no longer bear to be alone. Every afternoon now she betook herself to the kitchen. She could not resist the temptation to confide in Marie de Lados.

"He couldn't stand her while she was alive. He has no cause to regret her now."

"No truer word could you have spoke, ma'am."

"He talks of her as he does only because he knows it gives me pain to hear him. I'm a fool to let him see that it gets on my nerves."

"Maybe so, ma'am."

Marie de Lados was grinding coffee, but all the while her frightened eyes, like those of a cringing dog, never left her mistress's face, so terrified was she of not immediately responding to her moods. A fawning smile had now become a

fixture on her humble countenance. Nevertheless, she said nothing when Madame Cazenave added:

"When you're dead it's for a long time. . . . The dead are fast movers, as they say."

Marie de Lados said nothing, because each Sunday, at the seven o'clock Mass, as she went back from the Sacred Table to her seat, her widow's veil drawn over her head, the ghosts of all her sleeping race came regularly to life within her faithful heart, a long and dwindling vista of dead forebears, starting with the woman who, years before, had been left to die, perhaps of hunger; including the mother and the father who had never spoken a kindly word to her; nor omitting that odd sport of nature, Jaouset, who had found her on the heath one summer's evening of '47, and whose beast of burden she had been for thirty years; and ending with the little child whom she had lost when he was only three. All those who once had dragged out existence on an obscure farmstead came back again to life in a heart that was filled with the love of God. Marie de Lados, flinging wide the door, welcomed the crowd of her unknown ancestors, grouping them about that Presence which alone possessed the place.

"I'm not worrying. There's a saying that the absent are always in the wrong."

"True enough, ma'am."

Félicité said no more. Shrugging her shoulders, she left the kitchen. She was beginning to realize that the absent are always in the right, for they are of those who never spoil love's handiwork. If we look back over our lives we see that it is from those we have loved the best that we have always been most separated, the reason being, perhaps, that fami-

liarity breeds contempt. It is those whom we see every day who are in the wrong.

XII

THAT season of the year was drawing on when, in spite of the freshness of the early hours, one hesitates to light the first fire of the season as though fearful of the unknown. Before and after each meal the Cazenaves took refuge in the kitchen. This fact alone brought mother and son into a peculiar intimacy. No longer could he rest content with the small change of conversation. Each word he spoke bore witness to a secret travail of the mind, to strange and unexpected accesses of curiosity.

“Were you and papa ever really in love?”

What an odd question for a man to ask who had always thought so much more about the living than the dead ! She did not know what to answer, feeling, as she did, that the word “love” on her son’s lips had suddenly taken a new and searching significance.

But he would not let the subject drop.

“What I’m getting at is this – did you ever love him as much as you love me?”

The two things, she said, were quite different. It was impossible to compare them. And that was true. What possible connexion could there be between an insatiable craving to dominate, to possess – the sort of craving that was roused in

her by the darling being upon whom all her pain and all her happiness depended, to whose life all her life was bound – and that mere habit of affection and companionship which death had so soon cut short, leaving the widow with but small desire to mourn her loss?

Numa Cazenave had had a lonely death, because it so happened that Félicité had taken Fernand to Salies for a course of the waters. She knew that her husband had had a fall just outside the house where the Merlet girls lived, as he was returning from his daily card-game at the Club. But she remembered nothing of what had been told her about his last moments, with only strangers round him; about how, the previous evening, he had made a tour of inspection of what was dearer to him than anything else in the world – the charitable institution which he administered, a tiny piece of “property” which meant so much to him that he had left instructions that some of its heavy clay should be heaped upon his grave; about how his last words had been “in faith is our salvation”. She would not let herself remember the secret sense of satisfaction that the end had come without her having to witness it, that the only thing left for her to do, now that he was gone, was to settle his business affairs – an occupation which brought her much pleasure. Never having been in the habit of examining her conscience, she felt no compunction about indulging the heady pleasure which came over her at the realization that now she was free, that now she was alone with the sole object of her passion – whom she immediately removed from the school where his father had insisted on his going as a boarder.

“Did papa really suffer when my brother Henri died?”

This new question set her trembling. A great fire of vine-shoots was throwing a flicker of light upon the faded chequer-board of the tiled kitchen floor. Marie de Lados was busy plucking the first pigeon of the season. Under the lamp, her grandson, his fingers stuck in his ears, was picking an uncertain way through the questions and answers of the Catechism: "*Are there, then, three Gods?*" – "*Indeed, no, sister, the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are one and the same God.*" The boy, whose name was Raymond, always spent the weeks of the grape harvest with his grandmother, because his parents were away working on the Marquis's estate at Chateau Yquem.

"Both your father and I suffered."

"But you told me yourself that it was papa who insisted on having a photograph taken of Henri on his death-bed . . . and that you'd thought it wasn't worth the trouble."

She saw again, in imagination, the family album, and in it the pale, lifeless, obliterated and terrifying face of the vanished child. How strange it was that Fernand should show this sudden curiosity about things dead and done with! He was like a man who, insufficiently prepared and in a mood of absentmindedness, has been on a trip through beautiful country, and later is miserable when he thinks of all that he has missed, of all that he will never see again. He was laying a compulsion upon his mother to recall her husband's shattering grief, to remember how sickly and weak hers, by comparison, had seemed, when their younger son had died. One thought only had terrified her then – to the exclusion of every other consideration – that Fernand might catch the same disease. She had been afraid, too, that it might

be a serious disadvantage to the boy in later life to be known as the brother of someone who had died of meningitis. When she thought to herself 'It might have been Fernand' she felt as though she had been delivered from a great sorrow. Oh, God ! why must he stir the dust of these old memories ? Forty years had passed since then.

She raised her eyes and looked at him. He was standing with his back to the fire, fidgeting with his left leg as he had a way of doing when he was following out a line of thought. Ah ! it was still the hand of the enemy at work ! Only she could have awakened in this middle-aged man so desolate a curiosity about what had been, so strange a taste for useless dreaming. But it was not in Félicité's power to imagine the nature of her son's daydreams at this moment, nor to follow their bizarre meanderings. His thoughts were of her, his mother, and of himself, and in the secrecy of his heart he was saying: "I am the more to be pitied of us two, because she has had me, but I have never had anything."

The vine-shoots crumbled to ashes and the kitchen filled with darkness. Marie de Lados lit an oil lamp that stood upon the table. The American-cloth covering was soiled and torn by a succession of knives. The child sat with his elbows propped upon it, busy with his Catechism. His hand, buried in a thatch of hair like a crow's plumage, looked white by contrast. He was still muttering to himself: "*Are there, then, three Gods?*" – as though he did not know that there is but one – one sole and single Love. Now and again he lifted his sleep-laden eyes and gazed upon the sombre presence of his masters seated by the hearth. In the scullery Marie de Lados

was washing crockery, as she had done every evening for sixty years. When she came back into the kitchen her grandson was fast asleep, his head on the table, his mouth open. She looked at him and a smile of unutterable sweetness spread a radiance over her face that seemed as though it were carved from a piece of ancient wood. It might have belonged to one of the Black Virgins. She dandled him in her arms, though he was old enough now to take his First Communion. His charming little head lay against her shoulder, his scratched and grubby legs hung down with the weight of their nailed boots, which looked, for all the world, like the iron-shod hooves of a small donkey. She carried him away without stooping her old body. She had become a farm servant when no more than twelve years old, a maid of all work, what is called in the Landes a "slavey". In those days, she had had to move about the house with a child's hand in each of hers, and carrying on her frail shoulders the youngest of the family. If he cried, it was she who was beaten.

Félicité, feeling the eyes of her beloved son upon her, raised her own. It was long since he had been so tenderly aware of her. In a sudden surge of emotion she rose heavily from her seat, put her arm round his shoulders, drew down his head, and murmured:

"I have found my little boy again: he is sorry for his old mother."

Could she have known what he would reply she would have bitten back the words. Scarcely had she uttered them than the blow fell, full on her heart.

"It is she who wants me to be good to you. . . ."

And he kissed her on the cheek.

She broke from him. A freight-train trundled by into the distance. She could hear the horrible echo of his words in her heart. It was to the enemy she owed this favour ! She must bear the burden of this worst and final shame. So great was his love for Mathilde that he had brought her back to life, had convinced himself of her continuing presence, not only in his mind but in the room with them. From it he had derived a sense of peace such as, when his mother reigned supreme, he had never known.

A cataract of water fell from the sky upon the leaf-strewn garden paths. In the darkness a copper pan shone like a glowing human face.

XIII

NEXT evening mother and son were seated in the same place. Fernand had said: "Why shouldn't we have lights in the study?" – but Félicité had answered: "Time enough for that when winter comes." As a young girl, waiting in the lost loneliness of the Landes for the coming of a husband, she had been wont to sit, as now, in the kitchen where the air smelled sweet of chestnuts and aniseed. But in those days not a lamp but a resin dip had shed its light upon the recently published *Three Musketeers* lying open on her knees. It was the time of day when in those distant years, Marie de Lados had been allowed to sit down

on condition that she would busy herself with spinning. The dogs growled because of the wild boars drawn thither by the smell of pig. The napkins laid across the mouths of the earthenware jugs upon the table showed white. Visiting neighbours left their clogs at the door, and a gust of pine-scented night entered the house with them. A country waggon bumped over the ruts in the sandy lane. To-night it was the whistle of a train that shattered the darkness.

Félicité could hear the blood throbbing in her temples. She told Marie de Lados that she felt as though there was an iron bar in her stomach, and that she ought not to have taken a second helping of eel. She had done so only to tempt her son to follow suit. The shaft that had struck her twenty-four hours earlier was still embedded in her flesh. She said nothing. Not a word would she utter which might call forth a second blow like that.

Marie de Lados was "hearing" Raymond say his Creed. He always came to a dead stop in the same place.

"Again, from the beginning!"

"I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints, the Forgiveness of Sins, an' the Life Everlasting——"

"What about the *Resurrection of the Body*? . . . Again."

Glibly he ran through the opening words, then, like a young and frisky donkey, checked at the same turn in the road, a look of stubborn uneasiness upon his face.

"Again, from the beginning."

At once he started off at an easy amble, then broke into a gallop, only to be brought up short, ears well back, before — the *resurrection of the body* . . .

"Where's t'brat's brain a-got to . . . say it, now, twenty times over."

At this, the child, his face wreathed in grins as though he were playing the game which consists in saying Peter Piper Picked a Peck of Pickled Peppers very fast, set about repeating *resurrection of the body, resurrection of the body*, as hard as he could go.

When he had finished the voice of the master made itself heard:

"There are those who believe that the flesh is raised again. . . ."

As always, when matters of religion cropped up in conversation, Marie de Lados became immediately suspicious, drew herself up and looked at the master over the top of her spectacles. Seeing that he was not laughing, she became reassured. Félicité pretended not to understand of whose flesh it was that he was thinking, and grumblingly remarked:

"You know we promised Marie de Lados that we would stop getting ourselves mixed up in all these stories about the good God. . . ."

Then, as an afterthought, she added:

"I'm not feeling at all well."

To this he made no reply, but started walking up and down the kitchen while Marie de Lados lit a candle and led the child away. At last he came to a halt at the farther end of the room, as far as possible from the fire, and pressed his forehead to the black window-pane. His mother, in the grip of deep distress, spoke his name, but he did not hear her. She saw nothing but the vague outline of a hulking body looming in the darkness. She wanted to call him to her, but no

sound came. She could not see him at all now. He was no longer there. It was as though he had been swallowed up by, lost in, the darkness of the late autumn evening. At last, with an immense effort, she managed to cry out:

“Where are you?”

He replied, without turning his head, that he could hear rain, and pressed his face once more to the window. He stayed like that for a long time in a sort of relaxed torpor, listening to the obstinate drip-drip of water on a magnolia leaf which stood just outside, and then, as a puff of wind came and went, to the brief flurry of drops from the soaked branches; finally, to the noise of the last express as it dashed through the station without stopping, a wild dazzle of light and speed and danger in the blackness. Only then did another sound reach his ears which he thought was familiar. For some weeks now, after dinner, his mother had taken to dropping asleep with a suddenness, a completeness, that made it seem as though she had tumbled straight through a hole. When this happened she gave vent to unpleasing snores and her head dropped forward, the jaw hanging open. He wanted to be left alone with his thoughts, but, teased by the sound, noticed that it was more stertorous, more encumbered, than usual. He turned, took the lamp from the table, and approached the sleeper. He did not at first realize what had happened. Her face was the colour of mud, and her wide-open eyes looked lustreless. Her tongue was projecting slightly from the left-hand corner of her mouth, and all that side of her face was fixed and rigid. The other had contracted into an ugly grimace.

XIV

"THERE'S nothing to be done," said the doctor, amazed to find that the old woman was still alive. She was completely paralysed and incapable of speech. She had been moved downstairs into the study on the ground floor, so as to make it possible for her to spend the daytime in the kitchen.

"There be allus summut or summ'un for to occupy her mind, there," said Marie de Lados. "Her can hearken to t'train and look at t'clock just to see whether 't be up t'time or not."

But her life now was nothing but a prolonged waiting for Fernand. He went in to see her at eight o'clock each morning, and took his breakfast coffee on the corner of her table. He gave her a kiss on the forehead, and she settled down to watch him eat. At first the stare of her dimmed and blood-shot eyes had been an embarrassment to him, but gradually he found that he was paying no attention to it. After the midday meal, which he ate alone, he sat down for a few moments by the invalid, opened the *Petite Gironde*, and, though he was by this time accustomed to her ways, arranged the paper so as to have it between him and that fixed and hungry stare. "She do reg'lar gobble 'm up with her eyes," said Marie de Lados. When he had finished reading the news he went out. His mother sat gazing at the door long after it had closed behind him. With the only hand that she could still move she kept on rubbing at her dress, always

at the same spot, which was becoming worn and shiny. Her darling came through the kitchen again on his way to dinner, after which the evening proper began. He no longer kept his face hidden, perhaps because he felt partially protected by the darkness, perhaps because he had resigned himself to performing this last act of charity, to sitting there and letting himself be adored. For her the whole long day was but preliminary to these evening hours. Her eyes were taking their last fill of him before darkness should overwhelm them. . . .

Only when it was hard upon the third hour was the sponge offered to the victim. How much more bitter than gall was the sight, upon that taut and suffering face, of so much love offered to another! Yet Félicité Cazenave felt dimly that it was a good thing she should suffer for her son. What she did not know was that she had been crucified.

She died at the winter's end. The people of Langon still tell how he hung over her open grave, how he had to be forcibly restrained from jumping into it. Not one of them among all that crowd of people in the failing light understood that all he wanted was to catch a glimpse of the coffin in which all that remained of Mathilde was turning to dust and ashes.

XV

FERNAND CAZENAVE at first believed that it was only an importunate solicitor who was keeping him from Mathilde. How could he concentrate his mind, how plunge to those emotional depths where the loved one lay in wait, if, at every hour of the day, a paunchy little man imposed his presence on him, spreading out an endless array of documents and for ever demanding his signature? His father, Numa Cazenave, had disinherited his son, then a minor, in favour of his wife. The will was illegal, but it would never have occurred to Fernand to dispute it. There are still many old families whose members take no account of the law if it happens to conflict with the expressed wishes of the all-powerful head of the clan. Besides, Fernand, having reached man's estate, had been only too glad to shift all financial responsibility on to his mother's shoulders, which could carry the weight with ease. He had received from her each month all the money he needed, and this position of dependency – which had so irked Mathilde – had terminated only when the old woman had had her stroke.

When Fernand Cazenave finally appended his signature to the last of the documents he felt convinced that what had destroyed his peace of mind, the condition of heavenly apathy, which so far had made possible his moments of communing with Mathilde, had been nothing but the fuss and bother connected with his investments and his rent list. Later, however, he came to realize that it needs very little

effort to keep a current account at the Bank, and that pine trees will go on growing with the minimum of attention. He understood now that if, each All Soul's Day, his mother had regularly driven out in her trap on the pretext of keeping an eye on her "acres of treasure", her real reason for doing so was the urgent need she felt to breathe, once every year, the fragrance of her family trees at that period of the equinox when the wind sets their dark tops waving. Though the widow had quickly got rid of the vineyard which had been the delight of her husband's heart, she would never consent to alienate even a square yard of the gloomy forests among which she had been born.

Fernand could clearly remember those endless expeditions of his childhood when he had been taken to pay a visit to his Péloueyre grandfather. The journey had involved a drive, first through the Sauterne country, and then, when the vines and the smiling valley of the Garonne had been left behind, on and on until they reached a lane which had been trodden into holes by passing herds of oxen. His mother, in those days, had worn a bonnet with black ribbons tied under her chin, so that her face had seemed to look out at him from a frame. Bumped by the ancient two-wheeled vehicle, his head thrown back, he had seen the cloud-wrack of an October sky swirling across the space of sky left visible between the buffeted tree-tops, and had cried aloud each time a wedge-shaped flight of birds had crossed from one bank of agitated greenery to another. Sometimes a running freshet would take the road into a hollow where the presence of the stream was betrayed by a sudden chill in the air, and then his mother would wrap her cloak about him like a black wing.

She was afraid he might catch cold. If, on the contrary, he complained of feeling too hot, she would thrust an anxious finger between his collar and his neck.

Once, on a day of thunderstorms, gadflies had worried the horse so unmercifully that he had kicked out and broken a shaft. It was at the season of the year when darkness falls with great suddenness. While the country boy who acted as coachman was repairing the damage Fernand and his mother waited by the side of the road. He could still remember how safe and happy he had felt in that deserted lane already brimming with the dusk, just because his mother had been there. Above high banks of blackened grass the short russet fronds of burnt bracken trembled in the breeze. He had heard the animal-like cry of a shepherd calling together his charges who were astray and bewildered in a patch of fog. . . . He had felt safe and happy, just because his mother was there. . . .

He looked about him. This was the very room in which Mathilde had died. There was the shell-encrusted frame from which her unsmiling face looked out. A woodpecker sounded a note of spring. The morning air was full of mist and sunlight. Only when he had managed to climb from the depths of years gone by to the surface of a more immediate past would he once again feel Mathilde as a presence. He wooed soft sentiment, thinking how short a time they had been together. No longer now did death give the daughter-in-law advantage over the mother, for by this time her old enemy had joined her in the third vault on the left against the end wall. Both, from now on, belonged to a world that had vanished, and Fernand was incensed to feel how little of his life had belonged to Mathilde, over what long tale of

years brooded the vast shadow of his mother.

He finished dressing and took a turn in the garden, glancing furtively at the study window, where there were no longer old and watchful eyes to exasperate him. Was it because he no longer felt himself spied upon that he was so little moved by any wish to be with Mathilde again? Was it only when his mother's possessive love had hedged him with constricting flames that, oppressed by the sense of pursuit, he had plunged into those regions of himself where his wife waited? The flames had guttered out now, the fire which so often had made him furious was cold, and he was left alone and shivering among the embers. Some men are capable of love only when it is indulged at someone else's expense. What drives them to another is the wailing of the woman left behind.

Fernand, aimlessly sauntering along the south path, stopped to sniff first one rose then another, pouncing upon them like a heavy bumble-bee. But the privet hedge woke in him no memory of a face. Marie de Lados called him in to luncheon, and he ate more plentifully than usual of freshly gathered peas. Sitting alone after the meal in the study where the paralytic's bed still stood, he had a momentary feeling of well-being, and his thoughts turned briefly to his "hobby". He decided to send a telegram to the rue Huguerie, sat down at his desk, and tried to remember (the impulse already weakening) the form of words that once he had been used to write in such a heat of urgency (because the thought of doing a bolt had always come to him after one of his scenes with his mother). It had been all very well for her to mock at him, to exclaim: "You'll be in a fine state when you get

back. . . . Three days and you'll come crawling home!" He knew perfectly well that she would worry herself sick, that life would stop for her until she saw him again. But for the anguish that he left behind him, he might never have gone at all. How humiliating, yet how sweet, his return had always been, when, in an atmosphere of happy chiding, of tender ridicule and an infinity of small attentions, he had gradually come back to life.

The thought that now he would return from Bordeaux to an empty house struck a chill to his heart – the thought that he would come back, a bruised and beaten prodigal, and not see her, as he got out of the train, leaning over the balustrade of the terrace, shading her eyes with her hand and trying to pick him out from among the crowd of travellers. He tore the telegram into tiny pieces. There was nothing he could do. It was his mother who had decided that he should live only in terms of herself, only, as it were, drawing in the breath of life through *her* nostrils, who had permitted no competition of work, amusement, hope or love to divide his loyalty. Now, from the depths of the grave, she could triumph in the perfection of her labours. The maternal sun had barely set, but already the man she had born and shaped was revolving in empty space, a world cut adrift from its orbit.

XVI

THE rare pedestrians who used the road that skirts the main line from Bordeaux to Cette would frequently stop to eye the silent house among the trees whose threshold, it was said, none ever crossed. For a few weeks they noticed that the Venetian blinds were regularly drawn up at the windows of the room where Fernand Cazenave passed sleepless nights stretched on Mathilde's bed. But a day came, in the middle of the summer, when they stayed closed. In what Félicité had always called "the enemy's wing" all life had been extinguished. From week to week, change and change about, a brief flicker of life seemed to show, first in the windows of what had been Madame Cazenave's room, then of the one where Fernand had hoped to find sleep on his childhood's bed. But wander though he might from bed to bed, on each he was the wretched victim of insomnia. By the time autumn came, and Michaelmas brought the gypsies in their scarlet rags to pitch camp against the garden railings, and to light their reeking fires, Félicité's room and, later, Fernand's remained permanently closed. As in a human body near its end, so in this house, life withdrew from the extremities and became concentrated in the kitchen. The bed which had been set up for the paralytic on the ground floor had not been moved. Henceforward it was used by Fernand. Each morning, after a perfunctory wash, he went into the kitchen, and sat down in the armchair at the corner of the hearth whence his mother had

been used to devour him with her eyes while she waited for death.

Upstairs, the dust grew daily thicker in the room where Mathilde had died. It had dulled the glass of the shell-encrusted frame behind which the unsmiling face of a young woman was becoming progressively dimmer. Lilies that had been dry and brittle months ago still stood in the vases which once Fernand had filled and tended with such fervent care. Marie de Lados grumbled that she couldn't see to everything.

She found it impossible any longer to be the humble, frightened slave she once had been. She had been forced into too close a proximity with her ancient idol, saw it now fallen, knocked from its pedestal and wholly given over to her tender mercies. Fernand insisted that she should still sleep in a little black hole adjoining the study, as in the days when she had nursed her mistress, so that, should he need her in the night, his slightest whimper might not remain unanswered. She was his final refuge. She had known his forebears, and her sauces, concocted in accordance with long-forgotten recipes, filled the most distant corners of the house with smells that his grandparents had loved. She had "washed" for three generations of Péloueyres, and her hands had become worn in the process. But Fate had ordained that Fernand Cazenave should be pursued into the very fastness of even this last asylum, should be driven, at last, from his final line of defence.

With the coming of the wild duck, the wood-pigeons and the grape harvest, Raymond, Marie's grandson, whose parents were employed in gathering the Marquis's grapes at

Yquem, drifted back into the kitchen. He had grown into a good-looking, strapping urchin, with large, prominent ears and a chest the colour of fired earthenware. His bare, clean feet made a flapping sound on the worn flags of the floor. A look of ill-concealed merriment gleamed in the eyes that were like two red grapes. At first Marie de Lados had been afraid that he might tire the master, because he was for ever in and out, leaving the door open or letting it slam. But Fernand did not like to hear him scolded. He followed this little hopping blackbird with the same brooding look with which, a year before, he had watched his silent mother. He would have liked to talk to him, but what could he say to a child? Sometimes he would take from his waistcoat pocket a round box of cough-drops, and when Raymond came within reach would proffer the bait and murmur: "Like a sweetie?" Then the boy would stop, breathless and blushing, and, while he helped himself, Fernand would catch his arm and hold him prisoner. But Raymond, turning away his head with its blue-black thatch of hair standing up like a bird's plumage, and shuffling his feet, would try to break away.

As soon as Marie de Lados felt sure that the presence of her grandson was not distasteful to the master, she took steps to keep him with her all the winter. Fernand failed to scent danger. Félicité would not have allowed herself even to weigh the merits of such a request. She knew that "one must never be under an obligation to people of that sort". She would have sent Marie de Lados packing to her kitchen range with a warning not to "get above herself". She would have said to her darling boy: "I don't know what would happen to you if I weren't here! It's lucky for you I am! If it

wasn't for me, you'd have fallen into the trap. You can't see farther than your nose, or look after yourself any better than a baby. If I didn't keep an eye on the grapes, the first person who liked to try would have them all. . . ." But she was no longer there to walk ahead and clear a path for him through the brambles. He had no suspicion of the threat hanging over his head, not even when Raymond's parents allowed themselves to be persuaded to leave the boy with Monsieur Cazenave, though they put up a show of making a great favour of their permission.

It was not long before Fernand took a dislike to the young creature with his enormous appetite and chilblainy, ink-stained hands, who took no more notice of the master of the house than he did of the sideboard or the clock. Dislike turned to horror when he noticed that Marie de Lados was growing slack in her duties. She began to neglect her sickly idol of old days in favour of the boy, so brimming with health, who was of her own blood. They had to wait now for him to come home before beginning dinner, and the sound of his clogs on the garden steps soon became the sound that heralded the serving of a meal. A mild cough which Raymond caught in December was enough to make Marie de Lados desert the little room where she slept within her master's call. But there was worse to come. Under pretext of having to nurse the lad, his mother took up her quarters in the house. Marie de Lados went in mortal terror of the young woman, a toothless, sunburned country wench who pecked and glared with the ferocity of a barndoor fowl. The father, who worked in a wine-storage cellar, joined her at

nightfall – a great hulking lout of a fellow, bred in the Garonne valley, with a distended stomach bulging over blue trousers which no belt ever managed to keep up, – a ruin of a Hercules with guts rotted by the deadly sweetness of the sugary Sauterne vintages. Even when the boy became convalescent the pair of them sat down every evening in the kitchen, while Fernand Cazenave had to have his dinner brought to him in the dining-room, which was always icy cold in spite of a roaring fire. All the time that he was eating his modest meal he could hear their coarse laughter and loud voices, though whenever Marie de Lados opened the door to attend to his wants, all that reached his ears was a mutter of patois and the rattle of spoons on plates. As soon as it was closed, they resumed their noisy talk.

What they never realized was that, in the cold room with its yellowish panelling of imitation wood which he had always hated, Fernand Cazenave was not alone. Each time that he raised his eyes from his plate he could see, sitting where she had always sat enthroned for half a century, the majestic figure of his dominating mother – more imposing in death than she had ever been in life, whose angry and Godlike countenance caused her feeble son to feel ashamed. Why didn't he chase this pack of vermin from the house, it seemed to say? He would re-create in imagination the awe-inspiring divinity whose merest frown had set the underlings, the courtiers, the farm-hands and servants of every description, tiptoeing about the room. An old Aeneas, tottering to his final fall, he stretched to this all-powerful "genetrix" his suppliant hands. Browbeaten and defeated, he adored the woman who had always been so strong. How

admirable his mother had been ! It was absurd to think that a little giggling schoolteacher should ever have had the effrontery to cross her path ! Mathilde, whose ghost was present, too, but far from the fire and sitting in a draught, as she had always done in life, no longer appeared to him as deified by death. All that he could remember now was the stooping back, the craven air of a beaten animal, the yellow eyes of a tormented cat.

A passing train set the house shaking, but the shrill voices in the kitchen drowned the noise it made as it crossed the bridge over the Garonne. Something of his mother's temper, of that wild fury that had so often set the heavy, haggard woman stamping with rage, took hold of Fernand. He jumped up, and was already half-way to the door when Marie de Lados appeared with a plate of milk pudding. She stared at her master. Experience had taught her to detect the first signs of a gathering storm. There was uneasiness in her voice as she said :

"That girl be disturbing of you. I'll say summat."

Trembling, she returned to the kitchen. "That girl" filled her with the terror that all old people in the Landes feel for their children. (Her daughter and her son-in-law, having screwed her wretched savings out of her, penny by penny, still accused her of having money hidden away.) . . . For a few moments Fernand could hear the old woman's voice uninterruptedly droning on. Then, suddenly, in a horrible hoarse scream, her daughter embarked on a tirade in the local patois. Nothing marked more clearly the curious state of isolation in which Fernand Cazenave's life had been

passed than the fact that he was quite incapable of understanding patois. Standing with his ear glued to the door, all that he could make out was that Marie de Lados was standing up to her children. But what was it they were demanding of the old woman? The word "maaster" recurred too often in their talk to leave him in any doubt that he was the cause of this quarrel. But he could hear very little, and left the dining-room by way of the hall. His footsteps woke an echo in the vast space, at the far end of which the shutterless French windows showed two rectangles of frost-bound sky. Passing along a corridor he made a circuit and came back to the kitchen's other door which was immediately facing the main staircase. Shivering in the darkness, he could now hear not only "maaster" but "t'brat" as well. Marie de Lados exclaimed in French: "But a tell thee him's not once asked after t'brat." If *she* didn't know the master, was the burden of her argument, she'd like to know who did. He wasn't the kind of man to bother his head about a brat! The boy had amused him for a while, but now he didn't want to see any more of him. After all, a body couldn't *make* him. . . . But at this her daughter broke in with a screech: "Of course you could: you could make him do anything you wanted. Why, the old rag-bag's lost without you. . . . You've got no feelings for your own flesh and blood, that's about the long and the short of it. . . ." Then they started again, shouting at one another in patois.

Fernand drew himself up to his full height. His mother drove him forward. Her spirit lived in him, possessed him. What was he waiting there for? Why didn't he burst unannounced into the room and kick the table over? . . . His

legs refused to obey him, his heart began to thump: "I must sleep on it. . . ." He dropped on to the log-chest the lid of which was half open. It shut down with a bang, and the sharp report produced a pause in the shrill altercation that was going on behind the door. He got up and went into the study, where the fire had not been kept in. When at last he got into bed and blew out his candle he noticed that Marie de Lados had failed to lower the blinds. From where he lay he could see the night sky undefiled. It had been raining all day and the trees were dripping in the midst of a silence which seemed supernatural. The quiet sound of falling tears filled the night to the exclusion of all else. Peace came to him, a feeling of detachment. It was as though he were conscious of some realm of love and silence away beyond his own horrible existence, beyond the aridity of his heart, of a land where his mother lived, but a different mother from the one who, but a moment back, had possessed him like a Maenad, a land where Mathilde turned to him a face no longer tense and tragic, but for ever at peace, — a face that wore a smile of happiness.

At daybreak the rustle of the rain woke him. How he hated these dark winter mornings! He could not even remember now that he had felt the promise of a strange beatitude. All the brackish tide of his rancour flowed back with the coming of the gloomy dawn. He lay curled under the blankets. His old body was aching. He saw the day ahead of him like a sandy, empty road, leading across the burnt-up land. He closed his eyes, hoping to doze away the minutes that separated him from the oasis of breakfast. While Marie de Lados was lighting the fire and setting the hot coffee and

milk beside his bed, he pretended to be asleep with his face pressed to the wall.

XVII

FERNAND CAZENAVE sat down, after his midday meal, in front of the kitchen fire. He would have been terrified could he have known how closely, in the pouring December darkness, slumped there in his armchair, he resembled his mother in her last days! Marie de Lados came in supporting the weak steps of her grandson who had got up that day for the first time. She looked at the "master" and tried to fathom his thoughts. But he never shifted his gaze from the flames in the grate. She pushed the frightened boy towards him, saying:

"Come on now, say summat to the master, can't 'e?"

Fernand Cazenave did not even turn his head. She persisted:

"The mite's in a poor way, thin as a rake – all eyes."

And she pinched his arms. The master had taken up the tongs, but had to put them down again because his hands were trembling. At last he fixed the urchin with an icy stare. Incapable though he was of speaking patois, he did remember a few words which had been constantly in the mouths of his grandfather Péloueyre and of Félicité, his mother, whenever they had wanted to be rid of some intrusive man or beast:

"Bey-t-en !" ("Be off with you !")

He had risen from his chair, and still looked like his mother – but in the days of her awe-inspiring inflexibility. Marie de Lados retreated with a frightened curtsy, dragging with her towards the scullery the dishevelled child who hopped behind her like a sick blackbird.

He settled down for the evening in front of the study hearth. At four o'clock Marie de Lados brought the lamp and closed the blinds. He was left alone until the sound of shrill voices warned him that Raymond's mother was in the kitchen. He crept into the ill-lit hall and sat on the log-chest like an old woman, not making a movement. "Noa, noa," he heard Marie say in a supplicating tone, "'twill set t'blood a-rushing to's brain . . ." But a moment later the sound of her voice was submerged beneath her daughter's flow of patois. She exclaimed that *she* would see about laying the table, but why did her words sound so menacing? Fernand felt cold and went back to the study, where he sat motionless, staring at the fire. At seven o'clock Marie came in to say that dinner was ready. She took the lamp and held it high, as she did every evening, flattening herself against the wall to let him pass. The light fell full upon her wrinkled old face. He went through the kitchen, pushed open the door of the dining-room – and suddenly the meaning of what he had heard dawned upon him. On the clean cloth, opposite his own place, another had been laid, and, because the table was very high, the young woman had put a pile of books on the chair to enable Raymond to eat his soup more easily.

The boy was snivelling on the other side of the door. He

dared not enter the room in spite of being ordered to do so by his mother, whose voice was growing progressively louder. Fernand Cazenave felt a wave of blind anger form within him and swell to a toppling height. It was with a feeling of joy that he let his mother force an entry, invade and possess him. He filled a glass with wine and swallowed it at a gulp, then, with a sweep of his arm sent the plates destined for the child crashing to the tiled floor. When the din had subsided he had the impression that there was but one person left alive in the kitchen. He burst into the room. The first object he saw was the child's mother standing with the look of a frightened hen, and, behind her, Marie de Lados, her clasped hands raised in prayer. He remembered the phrase of patois which his mother had always used when she wanted to shoo away anyone, man or beast:

"Annèt ben !" ("Get out of here !")

The young woman took a few paces forward, and then, suddenly recovering her voice, said it was he who had wanted to have the boy stay in the house, that he had stood in the way of his getting a good job elsewhere, that it had always been understood he would look after him. . . . The child, she shouted, had grown very much attached to him. . . . Then, intimidated by the master's silence and by the cold fixity of his glare, she let her words dribble away into silence.

He said again: "Annèt ben !"

At that, beside herself, she screamed out that if they went it wouldn't be alone, that they would take the old woman with them. Did Marie de Lados understand what had been said? She uttered no protest, but stood there, half-turned

away, her face hidden in her gnarled old hands with their prominent veins. The scullery door was pushed ajar, and the boy peered through, looking like a young fox cornered in his earth. His mother, strong in the conviction that this final threat had given her a stranglehold on the enemy, showed her hardened gums and blackened teeth in a grin of triumph. The sight of it had the effect of handing over Fernand Caze-nave, bound hand and foot, to the maternal demon. With trembling fingers he fumbled in his wallet for a hundred-franc note which he flung at Marie de Lados (though it was her daughter who picked it up). Then, throwing the door open, he addressed the old servant in a voice from which every vestige of life seemed to have departed:

"You can come back to-morrow for your trunk."

She stared at him. It was as though not this master only, but all her many masters, now dead and gone, were turning her out of the house. She made no move, and he said again in a voice that sounded to her like old Péloueyre's: "Bey-t-en!"

He flung back his head, and his neck swelled like that of an outraged Juno. It was as though his mother stood there before them in the flesh.

XVIII

FERNAND CAZENAVE waited until the clip-clop of their clogs had died away beside the main line. Then he filled his glass again, emptied it, and left the dining-room. The last train had rumbled away over the river. The house had stopped trembling. A few vaporous clouds were drifting across the sky beneath a hidden moon which thinned the darkness with a diffused radiance. He stood in the middle of the unlit hall, and caught sight of himself in the mirror which hung by the front door.

The silence about him seemed deeper than on ordinary nights. He could not recollect that he had ever been aware of the sound of Marie de Lados's breathing in the course of his lonely evenings. But the breathing of a sleeper, even in a distant room, sets a quiver moving in the air so that, though we know it not, a tiny ripple of human warmth breaks like a wave upon the heart. For the first time in his life Fernand Cazenave knew the meaning of utter silence. Because he could hear, as on the previous evening, the interminable dripping of the trees, because round all that dying house there was no sound but that of gently flowing tears, he was now, perhaps, recapturing his earlier mood, was finding once again the peace that waited for him on the threshold of that kingdom where his mother was his mother still, yet someone else as well, someone who had moved him to turn an old and docile servant out of doors. He had a feeling that there was another presence living and breathing in a world apart,

spreading a gentle influence around him, calming his anger, filling him with a loathing of all harshness, imparting to him a sense of mysterious detachment. That, at least, was how he felt. He forgot the wine that he had drunk, forgot that a very slight degree of intoxication is often enough to fill us with premonitions of eternity . . .

The cold roused him from his pleasant torpor. He began to shake all over, and his teeth chattered as Mathilde's had done when she lay dying. Along the passage of the "enemy wing" he went, shivering, from room to room, till he reached one where the moonlight, creeping through Venetian blinds, touched a shell-encrusted frame and threw upon the wall a faint shadow of withered lilies. A door opening on to the landing gave access to the loft which stretched the full width of the house from wing to wing, above the hall. A skylight held the pure radiance of the night like water, and spilled it on a chest adorned with painted tulips. Stumbling against dead objects, he opened the door of the little attic where Marie de Lados had always slept in the days before she was called to watch beside her sick mistress. She had never ceased to make her toilet there each morning, nor to keep, locked in a black wooden trunk, the sum of her worldly possessions.

The cold here was intense and smelled of soap and of that peculiar something that hangs about the clothes of people who work for others. The skylight, narrower than the one in the loft, concentrated the limpid shine of the night sky upon a plaster Virgin with outspread hands, though leaving in darkness the crucifix above the bed with its coverlet of old figured cretonne which made the one splash of colour, struck

the one note of richness, in this tiny cell. Marie de Lados would gladly have parted with it had anyone told her that it was "worth money". Upon it Fernand Cazenave sat down. Leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, his face hidden in his hands, he wept. The cold froze the tears upon his cheeks: his body shuddered. He felt suddenly afraid that he might die alone here in the attic, and tiptoed from the loft. He had to cling to the banisters on his way down to bed.

He did not sleep. The weight of all eternity seemed to press upon his limbs, upon his chest. Was he dreaming, or was there someone moving in the garden? It could not be a dream, because Péliou started to bark furiously and then suddenly fell silent. It occurred to him that he had forgotten to shoot the bolts. He heard the front door open, gently pushed from outside, but felt no fear. The sound of footsteps died away in the direction of the kitchen, and a light flickered on the ceiling. He closed his eyes, then opened them again. Marie de Lados was holding a lamp, screening it with one hand, so that the light fell full upon her face, the face that was like that of a black Virgin. She stood quite still, making no movement until he called her name:

"Marie!"

Then, setting down the lamp, she came towards him, and he felt upon his forehead the touch of her toil-worn hand.

Johannet, Saint-Symphorien.

23rd September 1923.